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THE ROAD-AGENT RECOVERED, ROSE TO A SITTING POSTURE, STARED AROUND IN BEWILDERMENT UNTIL
HIS EYES ENCOUNTERED THAT SIL NT, STATUESQUE FIGURE,

Patent-Leather Joe's Defeat;

OR,

CAPTAIN MASK,

THE LADY ROAD-AGENT.

BY PHILIP S. WARNE,

AUTHOR OF "PATENT-LEATHER JOE," "CAPTAIN ARIZONA," "A HARD CROWD," "ALWAYS ON HAND," "THE GENTLEMAN FROM PIKE," "A MAN OF NERVE," "TIGER DICK," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A BRUSH WITH ROAD-AGENTS.

It was in Red-headed Rube's run—the "dirtiest" ten miles between Denver and the Golden Gate—everybody "allowed" that; and the night was "as nasty as they make 'em."

From the black heavens fell great sheets of rain, driven with blinding force by the howling winds.

Now and again the ebon canopy was rent by zigzag lightning; and the everlasting hills fairly rocked with the crash of heaven's artillery.

Hub-deep through the mud-filled ruts jolted the coach, the horses floundering, their driver swearing, the passengers wishing that they had stopped at the last relay, in spite of its wretched accommodations.

Beside the driver sat a man who was protected from the weather by a rubber blanket, which fell about him like a cloak, his head being thrust through a hole in the center.

A broad-brimmed slouched hat protected and hid his face.

One could make out that he was rather slight in build; and that was all.

He sat silent and motionless, receiving the assault of the tempest with patient endurance.

"What fun the dog-goned fool sees in ridin' on the box sich a night as this, is what sticks in my crop!" reflected Red-headed Rube, angrily. "But ef he likes it—blast him!—it's a free country. Blamed queer taste, though!"

Perhaps the stage-driver's reflections would have taken a new direction, had he known that with hawk-like vigilance a pair of steel-gray eyes were watching his every motion from under the brim of the slouched hat, and that beneath the rubber blanket a hand, with a gripe which no man, having once felt it, ever forgot, grasped the butt of a pistol, ever ready for instant use!

Bob Bolton—"the solid little man that Alameda county, State of Californy, piled her chips on, *every time*!"—did not endure the discomfort of that ride for nothing.

Out of the blackness of the night came the cry that he was waiting for:

"Halt! Throw up your hands! Death to all who attempt a useless resistance!"

"Co-rect, boss! I drop to your leetle—"

So far got Red-headed Rube. Then the bantering words died on his lips.

Into the ear of the man whose standing joke was that he "was hired to hold the ribbons, an'

not to fight road-agents—bet yer bottom dollar!" was thundered the command:

"Drive on, you accursed scoundrell—drive for your life!"

In amazement and dismay the stage-driver turned to find his silent neighbor galvanized into sudden and menacing life. By the flash of a pistol he saw the black muzzle of a second weapon frowning directly in his face, while a scream of pain diverted his glance forward, where the light which glinted through the rain-drops from the coach lamps showed him a man toppling from his saddle.

Red-headed Rube was nobody's fool. Looking down the bore of a revolver, his wits never went wool-gathering. He knew that the chances of a man on a swaying coach in that black night were "fair to middlin'," and weighed nothing beside the certain death at his elbow; for he was quick to distinguish that ring in a man's voice on which there is "no discount."

His foot forsook the brake, as if it were red-hot! From his lips issued a cry that electrified his horses. His whip-lash shot forth, and scored the flank of his off leader with a crack like the report of a pistol.

The horses plunged forward with a suddenness that caused the coach-body to roll on its leather springs, as if the wheels were being wrenched from under it, tossing the inside passengers in a huddle on the back seat.

Curses and yells and pistol-shots came from the astonished and enraged road-agents, to the latter of which Alameda's "brag" sheriff replied with unerring aim.

"My God, I'm plugged!" groaned Red-headed Rube; and, half rising in his seat, he toppled against the man "whose tail never molted a feather!"—so said his "Californy" admirers.

It was cleverly done. Another man, taken off his guard, might have been knocked from the box. But Bob Bolton had "been thar" before.

"You treacherous devil!" he growled.

And displaying a strength that no one would have expected to find in his compact little body, and a dexterity not less wonderful, he hurled the burly stage-driver from him, and snatched the lines from his hands.

Red-headed Rube went to the ground with a dull thud, and the swaying coach flew on through the darkness.

But after it dashed the road-agents, their pistols flashing menacingly on the night, their yells of execration lending an added horror to the warring of the elements.

Coolly the bold man who was fighting single-handed gave the reins a turn round the break. Then crouching in his place, so that the body of the coach formed a breastwork over which he could pick off the enemy, he waited for the flashes of lightning or of revolvers, and so "threw away" very little lead.

For a mile this running fight was kept up. Then the road-agents, realizing that they were accomplishing nothing, while exposing their lives to "no fool" of a marksman, delivered a final fusilade of lead, seconded by an equally harmless volley of oaths, and drew off from the pursuit.

The wind bore back to them a mocking laugh,

by way of cream for their humble-pie, as the stage disappeared in the darkness.

A few minutes later a strange scene was enacted back on the road. But little the worse for his fall, Red-headed Rube stood in the midst of a group of some half-score horsemen.

"A double-distilled, b'iled-down airthquake! you b'hear *me*?" he was saying. "To see him set thar you'd 'a' thought that his sand 'u'd all run down into his boots, the fu'st squeak; but when he' broke loose— Waal, I kick the beam at a hundred an' ninety-seven; an' when I fell on him, he piled me over into the road with a twist o' the wrist that wa'n't altogether slight, nuther! Don't none o' you small men run up ag'in' him. He's chain-lightnin'. I've been thar, an' I know!"

"Do you suppose that he dropped to your game?" asked Captain Mask. "If he should split on you—"

"How kin he prove it? I allow I ain't the only galoot between hyar an' the Pacific that pulls up when gents o' your style gives the word. But, say, cap'n—I reckon it 'u'd be *healthy* fer me ef I had a leetle somethin' to show fur that make-believe plug."

"But you're not wounded?"

"Nary a scratch!"

"What can we do about it, then?"

"Waal, ye see, ef you could just *blaze* me, without doin' no particular damage—"

"What!—do you want me to shoot you?"

"Jest raise the bark, ye know. Somethin' that 'u'd show purty fair without sp'ilin' the meat. I allow you've got a purty stiddy hand. I seen you lay out Cap Rand; and I reckon you hain't lost none o' yer slight. Ef it don't throw that leetle airthquake off the track, it'll make it solid with the boys, anyway."

"By Jove! that's not such a bad idea. If you will stand without flinching, I will guarantee to give you the closest shave you ever had in your life, without spoiling your good looks, or depriving the stage company of your services on your return trip, day after to-morrow."

"Drive ahead, boss. I reckon you'll find me nerry."

"Throw the light of a couple of dark lanterns on his head," commanded the road-agent chief.

His men complied.

Red-headed Rube looked steadily at the man into whose hands he had given his life.

Captain Mask raised a revolver and fired, so quickly that it seemed as if he could not possibly have taken aim.

Red-headed Rube dropped in the road, like a slaughtered ox!

A cry of dismay went up from the road-agent band.

"Oh, he's all right," said their leader, confidently. "Look and see."

They dismounted and examined the unconscious man anxiously, readily finding where the bullet had grazed the side of his head.

"It was a purty shot," said one: "but blow me ef I'd stand in Rube's shoes fur another try!"

Captain Mask laughed lightly.

"His skull isn't an egg-shell, fortunately. That little thump won't hurt it any. But, come! we must be moving. There will be a

gang after him, presently. If they find him unconscious, so much the better for our *ruse*. Rube is a mighty good man for us, and we mustn't have him suspected."

"How about our three stiffs, captain? It's a blasted shame that we've got so little to show fur 'em!"

"That's so, Scowler. Bring them along, of course. It won't do to have them found. It might cast suspicion on others of us who have been seen in their company."

"But we must lay for this new man, and square accounts with him. He got away with us this time; but he's too brash to carry a whole skin around long."

So through the darkness and storm the bandits rode away.

Meanwhile, the solid little man had gathered up the ribbons, and with no abatement of speed, swung into Golden Gulch.

The denizens of that "spanking little city" had heard the firing, and come some distance down the road, eager for a "slice of the fun."

Lustily they cheered for Red-headed Rube as the stage swept by; then ran after it, on the home stretch to the door of the City Hotel, where the foam-flecked and panting horses were brought up in the finest style of the art.

In the blaze of the big lantern which graced the entrance of the hotel they saw, not the Herculean form they expected, but an entirely different sort of man, who tossed the reins upon the backs of the horses, and prepared to descend from his elevated seat.

"But whar in Cain is Red-headed Rube?" was the cry, in breathless amazement.

The man who had brought the stage in made no reply.

Half-way down, with his foot on the wheel, he reeled and fell headlong to the ground!

From within the coach came an agonized cry for help!

CHAPTER II.

THE OLD MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN.

IN the doorway of the City Hotel stood a man, tall in stature and with an erect, military bearing. He wore a soft hat with a heavy cord about it, a long navy-blue cloak, and spurs.

His face was spare and sallow, with finely-cut features, and black eyes, hawk-like in their intensity. A drooping mustache, fine and coal-black, like his hair, shaded his mouth.

Such was Colonel Despard Dangerfield—passionate in love, implacable in hate, not over-scrupulous in the attainment of his desires—a man of ice at the gambling-table, of marble on the dueling-ground!

Unmoved he saw Alameda's brag sheriff fall to the ground; but when the door of the coach was thrown open, and a youth, certainly not over twenty years of age, issued therefrom, bearing in his arms the limp form of a girl of seventeen, then Colonel Dangerfield started with a murmured ejaculation of surprise.

His face white with a great despair, his lips tremulous with a moan of anguish, Alf Cheswick hastily bore his unconscious child-wife into the hotel, murmuring, while his lips rested against her cold cheek;

"Claire—oh, Claire!"

In the bottom of the coach lay a dead man, his clothes sodden with blood, his half-open eyes covered with a blue glaze.

Like wild-fire spread the excitement; and the saloons disgorging their hordes of revelers, soon all Golden Gulch was gathered in and about the City Hotel.

There was much loud and profane discussion over Captain Mask, the dare-devil road-agent—the "stiff," whom nobody knew—the "kids," whom everybody felt an interest in, on account of the wonderful beauty of the girl—Red-headed Rube, whose failure to "show up" could be accounted for only on the supposition that he had been "bored"—and last, but not least, the solid little man who had "pulled the stage through."

When it was made known that the lady was unharmed, having only fainted from fright, and that the solid little man was "alive an' kickin'," not seriously though painfully wounded, "the boys got up and howled."

To anxious inquiries Alameda's long-headed sheriff replied that Red-headed Rube had been shot from his seat while trying to run the gantlet; and forthwith a squad of fifty set out through the rain to recover his body, dead or alive.

Of course they found his devotion to duty scored on his body; and Rube accepted the homage of his friends with a modesty which disarmed the envy of his enemies. He was "layin' back" until he "heard from" Bob Bolton. But the sheriff's apparent cordiality when they met a few days later, put his fears to rest, so that he chuckled to himself:

"Threwed him, by thunder!"

But there's where the sorrel-topped stage-driver made a mistake!

Meanwhile the "kids" had awakened great interest in the denizens of Golden Gulch, the general sentiment finding a fair exponent in Strapping Sam Silvernails, proprietor of the City Hotel, and "cock o' the walk an' ginerel referee in this hyar sky-parlor o' Paradise—climate warranted to do everythin' but raise the dead!"—who descanted to this effect:

"Married! Married! Waal, I sw'ar! Married! Haw! haw! That's too rich! That's a-pilin' of it on! That's—that's— Why, dang his leetle skin! 'stid o' bein' married, he'd orter hev his ma whale thunder out of 'im, an' send 'im to bed without nary bite fur supper! I've been thar myself! But to think o' sich a shaver walkin' off with that nugget in petticoats!—pure, vargin gold, through an' through! Great Scott an' Ginerel Jackson!—but she's a cherribum!—a blazin' angel right out o' the hallylugeram?"

"Putt'er thar, ole hoss!—putt'er thar fur ninety days!" was the hearty indorsement of Golden Gulch, to a man.

So Alf found himself much sought after. Everybody had a "good thing," which they would let him into "free, gratis, fur nothin'!"

He secured a little cabin, in which he and Claire would have been as happy as a pair of turtle doves, but for a certain haunting specter of fear.

One night there came a knock on their door. Pale with fear, Claire sprung to the side of

her youthful husband, and clasped his arm, murmuring:

"Oh, Alf!"

"Hush, dear! Why are you so startled? It is nothing," he said, reassuringly.

"But the road-agents have become so bold of late! If our enemy—"

"Nonsense!"

But Alf took the precaution to demand:

"Who's therel?"

"A friend," came the reply, in the weak, tremulous voice of a man far advanced in years—"one who would warn you of a great danger which threatens you. Do not fear to admit me. I am only an old man whose failing strength would be nothing against your youthful vigor."

"Be careful, Alf, dear!—be careful!" whispered Claire, timidly. "There may be treachery."

"Not with cabins in such easy call," said Alf.

Then, seeing that his revolvers were ready in case of need, he opened the door.

Trembling from head to foot, Claire peered from behind her husband with fear-distended eyes.

The object which met her view did not reassure her quailing heart.

Alf stood on his guard, and there was a thrill of apprehension in his voice, as he demanded of the strange being who tottered into the room:

"Who are you?"

"You may call me the Old Man of the Mountain," replied the unknown.

The name well befitted its wearer: for his form was bent with the weight of years, and his long hair and beard were as white as the snow on the mountain-tops. His dress was a medley of cloth and untanned skins. He aided his tottering steps with a rude staff of hickory.

"Be seated, if you please," said Alf, placing a chair for his strange guest, yet keeping suspiciously on his guard.

"Thanks, my son," said the old man, benignly. "But my errand is brief, and other duties claim me."

"Why have you sought us?" asked Alf, deeply impressed.

"To warn you, as I have said, of imminent danger—of a foe with whom you cannot battle successfully, from whom you can only fly."

"How come you to know anything of our enemies?"

"It matters not *how* I know; suffice it that I *do* know. Tarry here but a day longer, and it may be too late. Be warned in time! Fly speedily—fly far! Your enemies are closing in upon you!"

The old man raised his tremulous hand impressively, and his voice sounded deep and hollow, like that of some old-time seer.

Claire shuddered.

Even Alf felt a thrill of awe.

"Who are our enemies? Whom must we fear?" he asked.

"Captain Mask and his minions. Once you escaped them. Do not challenge fate again."

"Captain Mask?" repeated Alf, in surprise.

"What is he to us?"

"Your deadliest foe!"

"But what have we done to earn his enmity?"

"Do you not know him?"

"No."

"He is—"

"Patent-leather Joe?" gasped Claire, unable to remain longer silent.

"You have said it!" confirmed the Old Man of the Mountain.

"Oh, Alf!" moaned his child-wife, shrinking into his arms, in an agony of fear.

But Alf's thoughts had been busy, and though he paled at the name of his dreaded foe, he asked, suspiciously:

"What proof have we of your sincerity? Who are you? What is your interest in us? How can we know that you are not seeking to lead us into a snare? If Captain Mask is, as you say, Patent-leather Joe, may you not be in league with him?—nay, *himself in disguise?*"

At that thought Claire uttered a cry of alarm, and gazed at the old man with horror in her eyes.

Alf drew a cocked pistol from his belt, and his eye kindled with hate.

The Old Man of the Mountain shook his head and smiled sadly. Extending his withered hand, he said:

"See! it trembles like some seared leaf in the December blast. The sap has gone down into the gravel! Is Patent-leather Joe like that? For the rest, alas! I can give you no proof. If you will not be warned, you must wait for the fullness of time, which proves all things. Nay, close not your ears; be not blinded by suspicion. For the sake of her you love and have sworn to protect—*fly!—fly!—FLY!*"

The old man had stopped just within the door. With a tragic gesture, as he delivered his final adjuration, he passed through, out into the night.

"Stay!" cried Alf, springing after him.

But Claire clung to him with a terrible thought.

"Alf! Alf! They may be decoying you outside, to shoot you down in cold blood!"

It might be so.

Alf listened.

The tottering footsteps of the old man died out, as they retreated from the cabin. Once beyond ear-shot, they passed into the firm, measured tread of a soldier, and the bent form was drawn erect, until it bore a striking resemblance to that of Colonel Despard Dangerfield!

But of this Alf, of course, knew nothing. As he listened, he heard the dismal sighing of the wind through the pines. Then came the sound of excited voices from the direction of the City Hotel.

Extinguishing the light, Alf crept noiselessly from the cabin, to reconnoiter.

All was silent and deserted in his vicinity. Everybody seemed assembled in the heart of the town.

"Claire," said Alf, returning to the cabin, where his child-wife crouched in the darkness, shivering with dread, "there is no present danger to us. But something of importance is going on before the City Hotel. Let me go and see what it is?"

"And leave me alone? Oh, Alf!"

"But, dear, there is no one to molest you. And I will be back before you have time to miss me. Besides, you are armed; and a pistol-shot would bring the whole town to your assistance, before Captain Mask's entire band could carry the cabin by assault, were they here to attack you."

He quieted her fears and left her, creeping cautiously away.

Three minutes later there came a faint tapping, which set Claire's heart to beating wildly, and filled her ears with a buzzing sound, so that she could scarcely distinguish the agitated whisper which came through the aperture beneath the door.

"Claire! Claire! We are surrounded. For Heaven's sake, quick!"

"What shall I do?" whispered the bewildered girl, thrown entirely off her guard, and entertaining never a thought of possible treachery.

"Slide the bar noiselessly; and be prepared to close the door the instant I am in—*noiselessly, darling!*"

The door opened.

A shadowy form glided through.

The door closed.

Then from the darkened cabin issued a gurgling cry, instantly smothered!

Passing over, for the time, what Alf learned at the City Hotel, let us see what occurred on his return home, after an absence of ten minutes.

He approached the cabin with a hurried, yet assured, step.

"Claire, it is I," he said, aloud, at the door, not trying it, because he expected her to unbar it and admit him.

But no reply came.

Then, with a heart-bound, he lifted the latch. The door yielded and swung wide. In dismay he sprang in, crying:

"Claire! Claire! Where are you?"

Dead silence reigned! The cabin was empty!

In a frenzy of fear he rushed forth again, shouting:

"Claire! Claire!"

But the name died on his lip. A dark form confronted him. A hand of iron closed about his throat. He was borne to the ground, struggling like a madman.

CHAPTER III.

DAVE PURDY'S WARNING.

FAR up on the cliffs, whose rugged faces, black, brown, yellow and red, were relieved by the perennial verdure of the tasseled pines, wherever they could strike root in a crevice, crouched a man, gazing intently down into a mountain "pocket," through a powerful field-glass.

In the bottom of the valley he saw two men in masks, both slight in build, one seemingly a mere stripling.

The other was in the act of knocking down a burly, bewhiskered ruffian, who presented signs of intoxication.

"Ah!" muttered the observer, "I may turn this to account."

And with a look of satisfaction on his face, he crept from the verge of the cliff, where he might be discovered by those below, and began

to make his way down the mountain, with the sure-footed agility of a skilled mountaineer.

The man was Colonel Despard Dangerfield.

"I am playing a game which requires subtlety and patience, and depends not a little on good-luck as well," he mused. "But she's worth it. Ah! how she has fascinated me! A queen among women! But I must get her without the stain of murder on her soul; and I can do that only by defeating her dearest wish. As for him—Bah! he may hang!"

That night the moon rode high. In a narrow mountain defile, a man bent over a small pool of water which had gathered in a hollow in the rock, and, using it as a mirror, examined his repulsive face, one eye of which was discolored and swelled shut.

"Waal, now, that thar's a beauty, I'll sw'ar!" he said good-naturedly. "The Cap slings a nasty bunch o' fives. Floored me like a log; an' sarved me right, too. Now, I reckon he could 'a' knocked the top-knot clean off o' me, an' never sweat a hair. A blamed handy man, fur rocks!"

"I hadn't no call fur to give the lieutenant no lip nohow. But when a man's drunk he's an infernal hog—that's what he is. Mighty white o' the cap'n to take that into account, an' drop on me light, when he could 'a' bored me jest as well as not, an' the boys 'u'd 'a' said—'Sarved the blasted fool right!'"

"But I'm a *healthy* subject fur to put on watch—I am! Thunder an' lightnin'! I'm blind in one eye an' can't see out o' t'other; an' my head's been buzzin' like a blast-box, ever sence that landslide struck me! Dave Purdy, ole boy, you're a used-up community! Don't never—"

But at this point in his reflections, Mr. Purdy lost all consciousness of earthly things. The butt of a pistol coming in contact with his skull, made his philosophy terminate like a rocket in a shower of stars.

When he came to himself and rose to a sitting posture, staring around, at first in simple bewilderment, then with growing apprehension, Dave Purdy found himself lying in a spot of strong light, but surrounded on all sides by intense black darkness.

"Whar in blazes—" he began; but a hollow voice cut him short.

"David Purdy, do not rise!—make no attempt to draw your weapons!—attend!"

"Who in the devil air you?" asked the road-agent in a voice not altogether steady.

"One who holds your life in the bollow of his hand!" replied the voice, solemnly.

Purdy glared around with distended eyes. He saw only the mouths of black openings, but faintly distinguishable from the ebon wall which shut him in—a veritable Inferno.

"What d'ye want o' me?" he asked, still more tremulously, for the superstition of ignorance was beginning to send icy chills through him.

"Listen! To-day Captain Mask knocked you down?"

"Yes, boss."

"Because of drunken insolence to Lieutenant Mask?"

"An' sarved me right!" Purdy hastened to

say. "I had no call fer to shoot off my mouth to the lieutenant, as uses all the boys white."

"Bah! you are poor in spirit. Where is your manhood? Have you no wish to be revenged for that blow?"

Now, Dave Purdy knew a thing or two. To use his own expression, he thought that he "began to smell a mice, an' dropped instanter!"

"Oho! I twig yer leetle game!" he reflected. "This hyar's a cave what I'm in, with the moon a-shinin' in on top o' me through a hole in the top; an' that thar's Cap Mask, a-hocus-pocusin' fer to draw me out."

This thought instantly dispelled Purdy's superstitious fears, and restored his self-possession so perfectly that, but for the fear of detection, he might have winked the eye which Captain Mask's fist had not closed.

"Oh, no!" was his shrewd reflection. "Dave Purdy ain't droppin' into no sly traps. He's fly, ole hoss!"

So with great effusiveness he said:

"*Revenge?* Thunder an' lightnin'! what fer? 'Cause the Cap roofed in my optic! That was a white deal, I take it. Ef I'd 'a' been him, an' he'd 'a' been me, I'd 'a' let the dog-gone nonsense out of 'im with half an ounce o' lead! Gosh all fish-hooks! ef he'd 'a' mopped the ground with me tell he wore me down to the shoulder-blades, it 'u'd 'a' left me with a civil tongue in my head. No, sir—no revenge in mine! Thar ain't a whiter cap'n—"

"That will do, Mr. Purdy!" interrupted the voice sarcastically. "You are too enthusiastic by ha'f. You play a very pretty game, but you are on the wrong lead. I am not Captain Mask; nor am I in his interests, employed to test your loyalty. I happen to know that you are honest in bearing no malice; so you needn't pile on the agony. But I am here to control your *actions*, independent of your *feelings*, so as to secure my own ends."

Dave Purdy stared open-mouthed, and tried to locate the voice; but the echoing corridors baffled him.

"You can write, Dave Purdy?" was the abrupt demand.

"Waal, yes, boss. Ef you call my hen-tracks writin', I reckon some folks kin make out the heft of 'em, by stickin' to it."

"In your pocket you have a letter with one side of the sheet blank."

"That ain't no lie, boss. But how—"

"In your trowsers pocket a piece of lead pencil."

"That thar's your trick, too!"

"Write with those materials what I shall dictate."

Dave drew forth the paper and pencil; and between the two the following document was produced:

"CAPEN MASK

TAKE NOTIS

"This hyarz a Warnin You hyear Me Grr
"Only fur the Boys Ide *Fix* You
He nock your leetle Nest enny how an mabee He git Squar with you yit

"I hain't got Nothin agin nun ov the Boys but Im bound to Drop onto You so the Hull Crowd has got to

LITE OUT

You soked Me a good wun an ef You show your Noze around theas Diggins after Toonorer Youle hyear frum JOE LINCH so keap your Glas Optick pealed fur Yours Trooley Dave Purdy the Boy whattle nock the Sox off ov You yit."

The foregoing is not an exact copy. Colonel Dangerfield knew that a genuine notice of this kind would contain more or less mis-spelled profanity; and though he made his work perfect in every detail, we spare the reader its more objectionable features.

Rest assured that Dave Purdy did not write a'l this without protest.

"Ye see, boss," he pleaded, "the boys—ary one of 'em—'ll shoot me on sight!"

"That is the least you have to fear," replied the voice, unmoved. "The slightest disobedience of *my* orders will bring you far more certain death.

"Look beside you. You will find a buckskin bag."

Dan felt just beyond the circle of light and found the bag.

"O en it."

"Dust!" ejaculated the wondering road-agent, upon examination.

"How much?"

"Ten ur a dozen ounces, by the heft."

"Worth—"

"Not fur from two hundred dollars."

"Take it. It is yours. Go out of this cave—out of this ravine—to the stage-road. Walk to Youman's ranch. You will reach it about day-break. An hour after sunrise the stage passes. Go in it to Cheyenne City. From that point all the world is before you. Go where you will, but never again set foot within the borders of Colorado.

"Not a word of what has happened here to any living soul! Between here and Cheyenne City you walk a ledge so narrow that, if you stop or look round, you will fetch up at the bottom of a canyon from which nobody ever comes back! You will never see the hand that strikes!"

"Now, go!"

Very much as if he were walking over a mine of nitro-glycerine, Dave Purdy went; and it is fair to assume that he breathed easier when he was safely in Wyoming Territory.

On the following morning the relief guard found Dave's "warnin'" stuck conspicuously on a bush beside the trail the writer had been left to guard, and bore it hastily to Captain Mask.

"The infernal traitor!" growled the road-agent chief, deceived by the plausibility of the thing.

He sat in a small chamber of the cavern which served his band as a home. It was warmed, dried, and partially lighted by a fire kept constantly burning. On the table several candles gave a purer illumination.

The other occupant of the chamber was Lieut. Mask, whose face, like that of his chief, was hidden by a black mask.

The captain tossed Dave Purdy's "warnin'" across the table to his subordinate.

"Well?" asked the lieutenant, having examined it.

"It is a notice to quit," explained the chief, nonchalantly.

"Which we must heed?"

"Unless we are prepared to fight all Golden Gulch and vicinity."

"What becomes of our purpose, then? Do you mean to be frightened out of it—to *run away*?"

The undisguised sneer in Lieutenant Mask's tones but ill comported with the ostensible relation of subordinate and superior; but Captain Mask did not seem to resent it, replying coolly, as he blew a wreath of smoke from his lips:

"Hardly. But we must operate from another base. This is no longer tenable unless we can catch Purdy and silence him before he betrays us, which is not likely. But—"

"Hold on! By Jove!"

Captain Mask suddenly leaped to his feet, so excitedly that the other also rose, regarding him expectantly.

"Well?"

"I have an idea! We must turn this to account!"

He began to pace the floor, and after a moment's reflection, struck his hands together, crying triumphantly:

"Just the thing!—just the thing, by all that's beautiful!"

"Pray break the seal of your mystery for my enlightenment," said Lieutenant Mask.

The captain stopped directly in front of him.

"To-night," he cried, "consigns the bonny Claire to my arms, and gives you your revenge, to the full, on the unappreciative Alf!"

Though the expression of his face was hidden Lieutenant Mask was plainly shaken by a storm of passion.

"Place *him* in my power and work your will on *her*, so long as it crushes her with despair!" he gritted between his teeth.

"And the 'million!'"

"Bah! Give me my revenge first!"

"You shall have it!"

And Captain Mask struck a summons-bell that stood on his table.

"Send Bricktop in," he said to the answering attendant.

And a moment later ruby-ringleted Rube stood bowing before the road-agent chief.

CHAPTER IV.

A CUNNING TRAP.

"RUBE," said Captain Mask, "I want to *put a head on you*, by doing my best to knock off the one you have on at present. I want to build a mansard over your eye. I want to construct a bay-window on your cheek. I want to—"

"Jehoshaphat, cap'n!" cried the astonished stage-driver.

"Oh, I propose to let you give me as good as I send, if it is in you."

"What!—you mean *me* to reach fur *you*, in real 'arnest?'"

"Certainly. I've met as good men as you; and I flatter myself that I can lead you a dance that will put the boys in good humor."

"But, cap'n, I'm *twic't* yer heft!"

"Not quite. But science counts for something when one man puts up his fists before another. And now I'll tell you why I propose this mill. It isn't simply for fun. It's business."

Captain Mask entered into a long explanation; and when Red-headed Rube left his presence, it was with a very complacent smile, and a look of new importance.

The road-agent chief then assembled his men, and ordered them to have everything in readiness to abandon their retreat that night.

In the afternoon Captain Mask and Red-headed Rube stood toe to toe, stripped to the waist, the former, however, retaining his mask, which but one or two of his band had ever seen him without.

The band were gathered round with wonder and expectancy on their faces.

Captain Mask understood how to hold those rude natures. They all knew his wonderful skill with the revolver. He was now about to show them that, in a purely physical encounter, he would conquer a man whom the best of them held in respect.

Scowler was referee; and at the call of time from him the contest began.

At first Red-headed Rube sparred on the defensive, shy about taking his superior at his word; but two fair knock-downs warmed his blood, and the boys saw his eyes begin to flash.

Captain Mask laughed:

"Don't be so modest, Rube, or I'll knock the daylights out of you!"

"All right, Cap, ef you say so. Hyar goes!" said the stage-driver, and from that moment he fought "for all he was worth."

The road-agents saw this, and the excitement rivaled that of any prize-fight.

In sparring Rube soon acknowledged his master. Once, and once only, he got in a fair blow, which knocked his adversary "off his pins."

As he "went to grass," the road-agent's only solicitude seemed to be the security of his mask, which, however, was not deranged.

"That's only one, Cap, fur the bombardin' you've been givin' my top-knot," said Rube.

"Have you the mate to it to make up the pair?" laughed Captain Mask.

"No; I don't believe I have."

After that Rube tried clinching.

Captain Mask accepted the challenge, and threw his adversary again and again until his band were wild with enthusiasm over his magnificent wrestling.

Finally Red-headed Rube said:

"Cap, when you've wiped the ground with me till ye'r' satisfied, we'll call this thing off."

Again Captain Mask laughed.

"Well, I guess you've got enough for our purpose," he said. "But I've just got warmed up. Is there any other man that would like a little fun?"

The band cheered lustily, but with Red-headed Rube's bruised and bloody face before them, all took counsel of prudence, and kept out of the ring.

After that, to the amazement of the road-agents, the sorrel-topped stage-driver stood with

his back to Captain Mask, while the latter fired several shots at him, clipping a lock of his ruddy ringlets, abrading the skin along one of his ribs, and putting two holes through his trowsers.

Finally, while the spectators stood open-mouthed with wonder, Rube walked off just as he was, battered and bloody and half-naked!

Had they followed him, they would have been still further puzzled to see him, after climbing down into an almost inaccessible gully, souse himself thoroughly, over head and ears, in a stream that flowed from a tunnel in the rocks.

Emerging thence, he crept into a covert of bushes, and there squatted, shivering, until after nightfall.

Then he made his way toward Golden Gulch, to consummate the plot which had called for this elaborate preparation.

There was a crowd before the City Hotel, engaged in animated discussion.

There stood the coach, its horses pawing the ground and rattling their harness with impatience, its passengers walking the hotel veranda in readiness for the delayed "All aboard!"

But the driver was not on hand, though he should have put in an appearance two hours before.

While speculation ran riot, and bets the most extravagant had been offered and taken, a shout arose down the street, and soon a constantly augmenting crowd was seen approaching.

The man in advance, with whose long, rapid strides the crowd was eagerly keeping pace, caused everybody to stare in amazement.

"Boys, I'm a *leetle* latish fur the coach, ain't I?" was Red-headed Rube's smiling salutation.

"Great cavortin' tornaders!" shouted Strapping Sam Silvernails, "whar in Tophet hev you been?"

And for a time nothing could be heard for the hubbub of wondering ejaculations, as all Golden Gulch crowded around the stage-driver.

"Feel me!" cried Rube, slapping his thigh.

"Through the crick, fer one thing," said one of the many who felt of Rube's wet trowsers.

"Look me over!" was Rube's next invitation.

"Ain't I harnsome?"

They did look him over from head to foot, with many ejaculations of wonder, as they noted the traces of Captain Mask's pistol practice.

"Waal," said Strapping Sam, "you've been whaled like blazes—thar's no discount on that! But whar *hev* you been, anyway?"

"Waal, gents, I've been through a thrashin'-machine, to begin with. Then I've played a lone hand in a *leetle* Bull Run. *I was on the Northern side!* To wind up on, I went down below!" concluded Rube, mysteriously.

"Whar?" cried his auditors.

"Down below!" repeated Rube, indicating with his finger the direction of the center of the earth. "But, boys, am I to stand hyar all night without nary shirt? It's colder'n blazes, now mind I tell ye, though maybe ye wouldn't think it. An' I reckon I could git along mid-dlin' comfortable with a few less o' this hyar

blood, an' about three fingers ur so o' Johnny Biggses rejuvenator."

Instantly Red-headed Rube had as many attendants as an Oriental pasha.

"Waal, gents," he said, when his comforts had been looked after, "I feel a leetle less like a fu'st-class slaughter-house; an' now I'll tell ye all about it. I've had a gay an' festive time, an' no mistake!

"Ye see, it's jest this hyar way. When I ain't runnin' the machine, yander, I mought lay around a-suckin' o' the bottle an' a-shufflin' o' the devil's Bible. But, that thar ain't my style. No, sir! I puts in my time prospectin'. You know that, boys."

"An' bully fer you!" was the hearty indorsement of an individual who could appreciate virtue, even if he did not always practice it.

"Waal," pursued Rube, "yiste'd'y I struck a mighty onlucky lead. I run my nose up a gulch what I'd never sampled before. Boys, I slid in thar jest as *e-easy*! But the blamed thing was like a rat-trap. Anybody could walk in; but the deuce of it was to git out! The fu'st thing I knowed, when I was clean in, a blasted thief riz up behind me in the bushes, an' he says, says he:

"'No shananigan, pardner! You've dropped into the wrong shop this time,' says he.

"An' when I looked around, thar was a gay an' festive cuss a-takin' o' my measure acrost the bar'l of a Winchester rifle!

"'That hand holds over me,' says I; 'but who in thunder be you, an' what in blazes d'ye mean?'

"An' deuced quick I seen; fur he give a whistle, an' in two shakes the hull o' Cap'n Mask's band dropped on me, like a thousand o' brick!"

"Captain Mask's band!" repeated the breathless auditors.

"Yes, siree!" reaffirmed Rube. "Maybo I ain't the fu'st man that tumbled into that trap. Ef they didn't come out ag'in, who's to know the difference? They hain't all got a stage waitin' fur 'em, ef they don't turn up."

The men of Golden Gulch gazed upon one another blankly. Here was a danger of which none of them had ever dreamed.

Red-headed Rube, more breathlessly listened to than before, if possible, resumed:

"Waal, yiste'd'y Cap'n Mask wa'n't to home; so they tied me up till he chipped in, this afternoon. He made up to me mighty sweet, an' said that I was jest the party he wanted to see, an' as how he'd give me a purty leetle stake ef I'd j'ine the band on the sly, runnin' the stage all the same, an' givin' of 'em p'int's when the dust went down."

A rumble of fury went through the crowd at this, which showed Red-headed Rube what he might expect if those brawny fellows ever "tumbled to his little game."

Preserving his countenance admirably, he went on:

"I told him as how I wa'n't a-playin' of it quite so low down *nit* awhile; an' that he was a thief an' a liar, an' the dirtiest white man this side o' sundown; an' I could whale all Tophet out o' him—"

Such a shout as went up!

"Hold on, boys!" cried Strapping Sam Silver-

nails. "We must have somethin' to wash that down! Raise him, boys!—raise him!"

And Red-headed Rube was lifted on the shoulders of his enthusiastic admirers and borne into the bar, where all who could get within reach drank to the hero of the hour.

"Blame me, ef he didn't take me up!" resumed the narrator, when this characteristic ceremony was over. "An' we had the purtiest leetle mill you ever see! He's a mighty handy man with his biceps, now, I kin tell ye!

"Waal, I got an idee into my head. I played off, an' let him whale me like thunder. Arter awhile I began to run when he reached fur me. Lord! ye'd orter 'a' heard them blasted road-agents yell an' laugh. But they laughed on the t'other side o' their mouths arter awhile!

"Ye see, when I run they give ground, fur the fun o' seein' their head-center chase me. But the fu'st thing they knowed, they woke up an' found me runnin' like greased lightnin' an' a-givin' of 'em the slip!

"Then they opened fire an' slid fur me; I hadn't much to pick an' choose; only I couldn't git out the way I got in; fur the guard would 'a' massacred me as I passed. So I went it blind fur the rocks.

"Waal, boys, ye know whar Jimson's crick runs into a blind gully, an' at the end goes down into the ground in a whirlpool?"

"Yes! yes!" cried the excited auditors.

"An' as how, about twenty rods the t'other side o' the rocks, it comes out of a tunnel?"

"Yes! yes!"

"Waal, they run me onto that tongue o' land jist above the whirlpool. Thar war no backin' out. They'd 'a' slaughtered me, sure! So I chanced it in that sink-hole!"

"Good God!"

"Waal, boys, it was scaly! I reckon it's easier to pass in yer checks out in the daylight, like a white man, than to soak under ground like a drowned rat!"

"I should smile!"

"I'd 'a' taken the bullets—blow me, ef I wouldn't!"

"Pardner, shake!"

And with kindred expressions, many indicated their wonder at the boldness of that terrible leap.

"But, boys," said Rube, "I come out at the other end, right side up with care; an' with twenty minutes' start, which it took 'em to climb round them rocks, give 'em the slip; an' hyar I be! I reckon they think I'm down in that hole yit.

"But hyar's my leetle game. Come with me, the bull raft o' ye. I know the way; an' we'll smoke 'em out o' their hole to-night!"

To a man Golden Gulch swallowed the cunningly-baited hook!

It was this excited crowd that Alf Cheswick saw before the City Hotel during the brief but fatal absence from his cabin.

In an incredibly short time the citizens of the mining-town formed and went forth to battle, commanded by Strapping Sam Silvernails, and guided by the man who was afterward immortalized as the "Champion Liar of Golden Gulch."

Robbed of her defenders, for an hour Golden

Gulch lay silent and deserted. Then her streets rung with the clang of iron-bound hoofs!

And Captain Mask had said that that night should deliver up the city to pillage, give Claire into his arms, and enable Lieutenant Mask to glut his vengeance to the full on Alf Cheswick!

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE CHASE.

No, not to a man did Golden Gulch fall into Captain Mask's cunning trap. There were two exceptions in the persons of Colonel Dangerfield and Bob Bolton, the latter of whom drew Strapping Jam Silvernails aside and said:

"See here!—this thing won't do. Them crazy loons will leave the town without a man to guard it. Suppose Captain Mask has spies here who will reach him before we do? He can slip out, flank us and gut the town, while we're creepin' up on a last year's bird's nest. Give me twenty solid men—sly 'em off one by one, so that the boys don't miss 'em—and maybe thar'll be some fun *hyar* before mornin'!"

Strapping Sam Silvernails, who would have scouted any distrust of Red-headed Rube, knew that there were some "mighty scaly" men in Golden Gulch; and so secretly did he put Bolton's plan into operation, that no one, outside of the chosen score, "dropped to his little game," save and except Red-headed Rube. He, remembering a certain look in the sheriff's eye, dared not betray his knowledge, but absolved himself with the reflection:

"I done my purtiest; an' now the Cap'll have to fight it out the best he kin."

For an hour Golden Gulch lay silent and deserted. Then the road-agents made their descent.

As if out of the ground sprung Bob Bolton's men.

"No quarter!" rung their cry, who held a road-agent only second in crime to a horse-thief, that culminating point of infamy in the West.

Like a summer-day tornado was the conflict, short and sharp. Then like leaves scattered the road-agents, hotly pursued by the plucky men of Golden Gulch.

But the door of Alf Cheswick's cabin stood wide; and nobody heeded it. In the excitement, even Ben Bolton had forgotten the "kids." Had Captain Mask gained all that he really wished, after all?

Of the masked road-agents, one, cut off from his fellows, found himself flying alone through the night, pressed by a foe who did not raise the wild yell of the rude bordermen, but rode as silent and grim as death.

Goad his horse as he might, the road-agent could hear the following clang of iron hoofs drawing steadily nearer. Glancing back over his shoulder, he could see that peerless rider, sitting erect and soldier-like in the saddle, his garments fitting his body closely—only the skirts of his coat flapping.

Revealed by the moonlight, they were grandly, terribly beautiful—the perfect horse, the perfect rider!

The road-agent drew a revolver, turned in the saddle and fired.

There was no response from the silent horseman.

Again the road-agent fired.

On thundered the unmoved pursuer, swerving neither to the right nor to the left—taking no precaution—offering no retort.

Now filling some mountain gorge with ringing echoes, anon skirting the brow of some beetling cliff—here in the broad moonlight, there in the black shadow of the pines—on swept the chase!

Again flashed the weapon of the flying outlaw—again, and again, and yet again!

Like a following fate rode that immobile foe!

Nearer!—nearer!—ever nearer! until a weapon could have been tossed between pursuer and pursued!

The brim of his slouch hat blown upward, the stern, cold features of Colonel Dangerfield stood out in the moonlight like the lineaments of some antique bronze. But his burning eyes infused that sculptured face with life.

Crack! Crack! Crack!

Not a muscle moved.

Great Heaven! did he bear a charmed life?

The flying outlaw was seized with panic, and fired wildly, until the click of the descending hammer, followed by no flash, showed that both revolvers were empty and useless.

Then a murmuring cry of terror issued from his lips; and he goaded his horse frantically. But the animal was jaded, and responded but faintly to the merciless spur.

Nearer!—nearer! until the foam-streaming muzzle of the following horse seemed to touch the wind-blown tail of the animal in advance.

The outlaw looked back, his black mask hiding the ghastly pallor of his face and the wild agony of his terror-distended eyes.

He saw a face like that of death, save where it was streaked by dripping rills of blood which told that all his shots had not flown wild, and, set therein, two blazing eyes, like midnight diamonds!

Then despair froze the frenzy of his fear. He drew his bowie-knife, and rode with clinched teeth and muscles tense, not turning his head again.

He heard the panting of the following steed. He felt the spatter of foam from its nostrils. He saw its outstretched head at his elbow.

A bound! Another! Another!

A hand fell upon his shoulder!

A voice—cold, collected, not even stern—said:

"You are my prisoner."

Then the concentrated forces of despair burst forth.

"Never!" shouted the road-agent; and his bowie-knife flashed in the moonlight.

But a hand of steel masked in velvet caught his wrist, shifted its grasp to his hand, and disarmed him, with magical celerity, and yet without harshness.

An instant later Colonel Dangerfield held a limp form in his arms.

His disengaged hand checked the mad course of the horses. Then he dismounted, lifted his unconscious captive from the saddle, and laid the lifeless body on a bed of mountain moss with a gentleness that was almost womanly.

He did not remove the mask; but he drew off

the gauntlets, discovering shapely white hands, which he chafed with a reverent touch.

Soon nature began to reassert herself. At the first signs of returning animation, Colonel Dangerfield drew on the gauntlets again; then rose and stood a little apart, with folded arms.

The road-agent recovered, rose to a sitting posture, stared around in bewilderment until his eyes encountered that silent, statuesque figure and then leaped to his feet.

"So I am your prisoner?" he said, in a voice tremulous, yet with a substratum of defiance and the least shade of a sneer.

"I beg your pardon, madam," said Colonel Dangerfield, with a serene dignity which was kindly without being deprecating. "I do not war upon women. When you have recovered, if you will allow me to hand you to your saddle, you are free to go where you will—with or without my escort, as you shall elect."

Stung with a sense of bitter humiliation by this generous concession to her womanhood from a man whose life she had attempted more than half a score of times, with revolver and bowie-knife, she cried hotly:

"How did you know that I am a woman?"

He might have cited her womanly weakness in fainting, but with nicer tact he replied:

"Your voice betrayed you."

Still flushed with passion, she did not return his delicate courtesy, but demanded:

"You did not remove my mask?"

"Madam," replied Colonel Dangerfield, with indulgent patience, yet perfect dignity, "I trust that I am a gentleman!"

That brought her to a sense of what was due this man who was so unlike other men.

"I beg your pardon, sir!" she began, in an entirely different tone of voice.

"Pray do not mention it!" interposed Colonel Dangerfield, quickly. "I am sorry to have caused you the discomfort of this ride. I hope it may be followed by no ill results."

"Can you mention my '*discomfort*,' when—I see that—I—have *injured* you—perhaps seriously?" stammered the woman, her voice now veined with shame and deep concern, as she gazed into his blood-stained face.

"It is nothing, I assure you! Do not give it a thought," replied Colonel Dangerfield, lightly.

But his voice thrilled with a new emotion.

Love shakes the nerves of the soldier who has braved the cannon's mouth. So this man, who had never flinched from her bullets, now hastened to escape her solicitude, with fear and trembling.

"If you will allow me, I will see that your horse is in proper condition," he said, and not waiting for her reply, immediately turned to his self-imposed task.

A moment later she was in the saddle, crimson behind her mask with a new sense of shame at her dress so ill befitting her sex.

Extending to him her ungauntleted hand, she said:

"Forgive the cruel injuries this hand has inflicted. I can never forget your magnanimous forbearance!"

With a silence more impressive than words, he reverently kissed the hand that had smitten him.

Then she was gone. But with her went the recollection of that white face, streaked with blood, and those burning black eyes. Go where she might, ever that peerless rider haunted her fancy, and woke strange emotions in her soul.

And he? With a dreamy, far-away look in his eyes, and a strange tenderness softening his features, long he stood gazing at the spot where she had disappeared in the shadows, then mounted and rode slowly back over the way along which he had rushed upon death at such break-neck speed.

"But to win thee, my peerless queen!" he murmured, then choked with excess of emotion.

He found Golden Gulch wild with fury over the disappearance of the "kids."

But with an ominous flash in his eyes, which showed that he was on his mettle, Bob Bolton had declared:

"I swear to rescue them, if I have to go single-handed into Captain Mask's very den!"

CHAPTER VI.

FREEZING TO DEATH!

ALF CHESWICK, though young, was no "chicken," either in strength or in the wrestler's art, but he found himself in the grasp of no common man.

While he struggled, his revolvers and bowie-knife were drawn from his belt. The next moment his antagonist rose to his feet, lifting him also, and then hurled him to the ground with stunning force, and *ran away!*

All unarmed as he was, and with his head spinning round with the shock of his fall, Alf would undoubtedly have pursued the supposed abductor of his wife, but ere he had taken half a dozen steps, he heard a muffled cry and saw a clump of bushes which he was passing violently agitated; and a body, which proved to be Claire bound and gagged, rolled across his path, she having taken this desperate means of attracting his attention.

It was the work of a moment to lift her in his arms and bear her into the cabin, where he cut her bonds and removed the cruel gag.

"Oh, Alf!" she sobbed, "how narrowly we have escaped!"

"We have escaped, thank God!" he cried, clasping her trembling form close, a thousand times more precious to him after that moment of agony when he thought that he had lost her.

Then, brokenly, she told him how she had been entrapped—how her abductor, surprised by his unexpected return, had left her in the bush and gone back to silence him, lest he should alarm the town.

"Claire," said Alf, his boyish face hardening into lines of bitter hatred, better fitting a world-weary man than one so young, "I swore a deadly vendetta against Patent-leather Joe, for the murder of my father, for the life-wrong done my mother, for the equally cruel injury meditated against my sister! For your dear sake I recanted that oath, because you shuddered at the thought of my having a human life to answer for—even that of one who had wronged me through all who were dear to me, all in

whose veins I could trace kindred blood. Well, it has come to this—I must renew that oath, and *execute it*, or see repeated in our lives the calamity which befell my parents! That man will never rest until he has destroyed me as he destroyed my father, and borne you to the lifelong misery which he inflicted on my mother!"

"No! no! Alf dear!" pleaded his girl-wife, with her arms about his neck. "No misfortune through the wickedness of others can equal the irreparable calamity of blood on your soul! Now I can lie in your arms in perfect peace—but then—*then*, much as I love you, I could never approach you without a shudder! Oh, Alf, it would kill me! No! no! have patience, dear. We can fly—"

"Fly!" interrupted Alf, bitterly. "Have we not fled? Why should he leave us no place on earth where we can rest secure? Claire, this constant dread is wearing upon you. I can see it, my darling!"

"But, my husband, must we stay in this lawless country, where our enemy has every opportunity to follow and plot against us? In a place where law is maintained we could defy his malice. Alf, dear, I have said nothing, but sometimes of late I have felt a little—just a *little*, dear—homesick. If I could only see papa once more! Cannot we go—"

But Alf Cheswick had turned ghastly pale, and into his eyes had come a horror unspeakable. Abruptly he rose, thrusting his wife from his lap, and began to pace the floor, murmuring huskily:

"No! no! not there—not there! We cannot seek"—he seemed to choke ere he added in a gasping whisper—"your father!"

How innocently she had spoken of rejoining her father! Had she known—oh, *had* she known that that father was dead, months and months ago!—that the husband on whose heart she had slept in child-like confidence and love, untroubled by any intuition of the dread phantom that stood between them, was accused as his murderer! This it was that had made the dauntless Flash Lightning, who dared look any man in the eye, fly like an arrant coward deep and deeper into the wilderness, dreading to meet any one who could tell his child-wife of her father's death, and of the suspicion that had fastened, like a devil-fish, upon her husband! Added to all the wrong and suffering that had been heaped upon him, could he endure this—that she—*she* should shrink from him, with an awful questioning in her eyes?

Confronted suddenly by this horror, he had lost presence of mind and control over his emotions; and his wild words and still wilder manner had partially withdrawn the veil from before a skeleton, the existence of which Claire had never suspected.

Now, with her face growing whiter and whiter, and her eyes wider, deeper, darker she stared after him, crying:

"Alf! Alf! In Heaven's name what do you mean?"

He saw the gulf yawning at his feet. He strove to speak to avert in some way the falling of that last calamity, the swamping of her faith in him, the annihilation, at one fell swoop of their happiness forever! A suffocating lump

swelled in his throat; his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth; he could not articulate a sound!

She sunk on her knees at his feet, raised her eyes with wild questioning to his, and gasped:

"My husband, speak!—speak!"

Then, with a mighty effort, he got himself in hand, took her white face between his palms, and gazing down into her soul, made answer:

"I mean that this world is full of black, damnable villainy—that men—*innocent* men—are made to suffer for the acts of those of whom hell itself holds no equal!

"Oh," he pursued, lifting his face, full of fierce, furious rebellion, in a wild invocation of Heaven, "why does not God forsake them and annihilate them?"

Then he bent again over his frightened, bewildered wife, and lifting her up, said, authoritatively:

"Not a word!—if you love me, not another word! My burden is already more than I can bear! Come, let us fly this accursed spot! We have been warned. An hour's delay may lose all!"

With her brain in a whirl—only perceiving dimly that her husband had some secret sorrow, but never dreaming of doubting him, she obeyed.

After a hasty preparation, they fled.

The frustration of Captain Mask's plot was perfect. He found only an empty cabin on the one hand and a score of plucky mountaineers on the other.

But the matter had another aspect. Bob Bolton was completely off the track, believing the "kids" in the power of the road-agents. While he was running into needless jeopardy in this direction, the fugitives were brought face to face with the most awful peril known in the mountains—the terrible "blizzard," that sudden, furious storm of hail and snow and freezing cold in which all things perish!

"Alf," said his wife, as they breasted the blast, bugging their flapping wraps about them, "I'm so cold!"

And an icy shiver set her teeth to chattering.

"Try to bear up, little wife," he replied caressingly. "We'll find shelter presently."

With a faint smile she raised her eyes to his affectionate gaze. "Little wife" was the title she loved best from his lips.

"Where are we, Alf?" she asked, trusting all to him. "Everything looks so wild."

"That is because we got off the trail back by that shelving rock. We will pick it up again in a minute. Then the walking will be easier."

Alf Cheswick tried to speak in an assured tone; but there was a look of deepening concern in his eyes, as he glanced around on rocks looming black and bare and snow-burdened pines standing like sheeted ghosts—the heavens a low-hung, dull gray pall, the earth a trackless barren!

Perhaps the look did not escape his child-wife; for, after some moments of thoughtful silence, she said:

"Alf—tell me the truth—are we lost?"

Lost! Little Claire lost in the terrible night that was approaching? Would the morning sun

find her lying still and white, as pure as her snow-drift winding sheet?

Alf shuddered, and his tongue refused to frame a reply which must confirm her fears.

The young wife understood, and glanced about as if the gathering shadows were malevolent phantoms.

Then dead, boding silence fell between them!

"But, come!" cried Alf, presently. "It won't do to stand here. If we keep moving, we may come upon the trail by accident, or some abandoned hut, or a cave. Anything will have to do us, in this strait."

Claire yawned, as she plodded drearily forward.

"It don't seem as cold as it did," she observed, little suspecting the significance of that delusion.

"But, Alf, I'm so tired that I can scarcely drag one foot after the other."

A terrible fear smote Alf Cheswick's heart. He knew!

"Let us hurry," he urged. "We will reach shelter so much the sooner. And every minute counts in this icy wind."

"If we only had a place to rest a minute!" sighed Claire, with another and more protracted yawn. "The wind makes me sleepy."

"My God! My God!" groaned Alf, in thought; and he looked around in agonized despair.

"Don't hurry me so fast, dear," petitioned Claire. "Let me stop here a moment, to get my breath."

"No! no! Claire, don't stop! For Heaven's sake, let us keep on!"

"Only a minute, Alf. Then we can go on—A—a—ah!" How sleepy I am! Can't you find a cave, or an overhanging rock?"

"Oh, Claire!—little wife!—don't you know?—you mustn't stop!—not an instant! For my sake, darling! Fight against this drowsiness, if you love me! Claire, it's because you're so cold! If you fall asleep now, you will never wake again! I shall lose you!"

The girl stumbled, as he hurried her forward. Her eyes were heavy and had a far-away, vacant expression. She did not seem to apprehend the meaning of his words.

"Oh, I must rest, Alf!" she said, with just a shadowy petulance, as if her sluggish faculties could not be further roused.

Her flagging pace would have come to a standstill, but that he dragged her forward.

Then he spoke sternly.

"I tell you, Claire, you must not stop! Do you hear me? You are freezing!"

He thought to startle her into renewed activity. Ah! how wretchedly he failed!

"Freezing?" she repeated, mechanically.

But even as she spoke, her heavy eyelids closed, and she leaned against her husband.

"Claire! Claire!" he cried, shaking her, in an agony of fear.

She made no response. She was asleep!

Then from the wrung soul of the youthful husband went up a terrible cry!

"Great God in Heaven! she is freezing!—she will die! Claire! Claire! Claire!"

Wildly he tore off his overcoat, and wrapped it about her, crying:

"Oh God! Oh God!"

But his voice choked. Tears—not detracting from his manhood—blinded his eyes, as he gazed into her marble-white face.

"Oh, if our cruel enemies could see her now!" he moaned. "They have driven her to death! Claire! Claire! my darling! I will save you! I will save you! Help! Help! HELP!"

Wildly his cry rose to be borne far away on the driving wind, as he lifted his unconscious child-wife in his arms and ran stumbling forward with her.

"Oh for some place of shelter! My darling is dying—freezing to death!—for only a hut, or a cave, and a fire! God send us aid! Help! Help! Oh, help!"

But the icy winds cut him to the bone, and the driving snow buffeted and blinded him.

"Help! Help! Help!"

He slips and falls. Up and on again! Frantically, aimlessly on!

He has lost all notion of direction. His one instinct is motion. Chance or Providence must guide his steps.

Now he plunges into a snow-drift. Benumbed with cold, he flounders out and regains his feet.

Now he staggers beneath his burden. Now he reels in zigzag course.

His voice is fainter, his articulation thickened.

At last he sinks exhausted.

"Claire, my darling, we are dying together! At least, our enemies have failed to separate us. Can you hear me? Kiss— Claire!"

His blue lips meet her unresponsive ones. The snow drifts over them. They do not feel its icy touch. They are at peace!

CHAPTER VII.

THE MASKED MONK.

HIDDEN among the bushes, beside the rocky bed of a now dry watercourse which followed the bottom of a narrow ravine, a villainous, hang-dog fellow sat on a fallen tree-trunk, with a rifle between his knees.

From the "stump of a pipe," the bowl of which he held concealed in his broad palm, he drew small whiffs, blowing the smoke into the bosom of his woollen shirt, apparently so that it should not curl above the tops of the bushes and betray him in the indulgence of a stolen delight, for between whiffs he peered about and listened guiltily.

Further down the ravine a second skulker was exercising his sense of smell as vigilantly as the former used sight and hearing.

"Some blamed fool running the risk of getting shot for the sake of a pull at the old pipe!" he muttered. "All right, my covey! Perhaps I'll put you and your pipe out together!"

Bob Bolton—"the Solid Little Man"—loosened his revolvers, drew his bowie-knife, and, leaving his short-barreled rifle on the ground, crept forward, an inch at a time.

Not the rustle of a leaf, not the snapping of a twig, betrayed his cat-like approach.

"Ah! there's my mutton!" he muttered, a moment later, as, parting the bushes, he caught sight of the smoker. "Captain Mask ought to find a better man than you to guard the gateway to his new stronghold. But I must approach you from behind, my sly smoker. I

late to strike a man in the back; but it's your silence, not your life, that I'm after.

He had made scarce half a dozen steps of the contemplated *detour*, when he stopped abruptly, with a half-suppressed ejaculation of amazement:

"Je-ru-sa-lem!"

And staring straight before him, he saw rise out of the bushes a strange figure, whose like had never before been seen in that part of the Rocky Mountains at least.

It was a monk, robed, and cowed, and masked. A rosary depended from his girdle; but, all out of keeping with his assumed character, a brace of cocked revolvers were in his hands. The last were gloved.

Who he was, what he was like, the beholder, though his nearest friend, would have been baffled to discover, for even the shape of his body was effectually concealed by his clever disguise.

"My son," he said—and, judging from his articulation he must have had a pebble in his mouth to alter his voice—"my son, do not look round, but throw up your hands."

The pipe dropped from the lips of the smoker, and he started to his feet as if shot; but he was wise enough to obey the orders of the man who "had the drop" on him.

In the Rocky Mountains men soon learn that the command which comes across the barrel of a "six-shooter" admits of no appeal or parley.

Thrusting one of his revolvers beneath his robe, the Masked Monk strode across the intervening space and at his leisure, disarmed his captive, securing his weapons also somewhere among the loose folds of his gown.

"Boss," said the late smoker, in a voice which showed some traces of fear, "I reckon you're barkin' up the wrong tree. I'm Pete Larabee, o' Hard Pan, out prospectin'. What have you ag'in' me?"

"Rather queer tools for prospecting, Mr. Larabee. No doubt this is your pick, eh?" asked the monk, lifting the rifle which had fallen from Pete's knees.

"Waal, ye see," stammered Pete, "I was jest gittin' the lay o' the land, like."

"Ah! I see. Well, suppose we *prospect* a little while together. Forward, march!"

At the mouth of the revolver the monk marched his prisoner up the ravine; while Bob Bolton stared after them, chuckling:

"That cool fellow took the bone right from under my paw. But he has done for me all that I intended to do, and perhaps more. The way is clear, and, taken up with this bold masker, they'll be less likely to discover me. Ha, ha! there'll be *three* of us in this famous *prospecting* party!"

And recovering his rifle, he crept in the wake of the others into the very citadel of Captain Mask's stronghold—the eyrie of the boldest road-agent in all the Sangre de Cristi Mountains.

All this time Pete Larabee had not seen his assailant, the cold muzzle of a revolver twice checking an attempt to look around.

Presently he said, in a whining voice:

"Boss, air you one o' the boys, or an outsider?"

"You'll find out soon enough," was the non-committal answer.

"'Cause, ef you *air* an outsider, ye won't give away the pipe business—will ye, now?" pleaded the delinquent.

The Masked Monk only laughed; but after a moment's consideration he said:

"Look a-bere, my Christian friend—suppose I let you off—will you tell me all about this band of rascals?"

"Then you *air* an outsider?"

"Answer my question!"

"You ain't puttin' up a job on me, boss? You wouldn't play it so low down?"

"Confound you! I see you want me to knife you!"

"No, boss, no! Drive ahead. I'll answer!"

"How many men have you?"

"Twenty."

"Who is your captain? His real name, mind you!"

"That I don't know, boss."

"Nonsense! What name does he go by in Golden Gulch?"

"I'm givin' it to ye straight, boss. I don't know him from a side o' sole-leather! Ye see, he always goes masked—him an' the lieutenant."

"Lieutenant who?"

"Lieutenant Mask, jest the same as he is Captain Mask. They're as close as clams—both on 'em. None o' the boys never seen either o' their mugs."

"Oho!" said the monk, reflectively.

After that not a word was exchanged. Captor and captive walked boldly in the trail, while Bob Bolton crept stealthily after them.

Perhaps a quarter of a mile up, the ravine widened into a plateau circumvallated with mountain peaks.

At the *debouchure* the monk and his captive were hailed by an unseen challenger:

"Hollo! What in Cain is the meanin' o' this?"

"Don't shoot, Hank!" cried Larrabee. "I reckon ef you let us alone, we'll fotch up at the captain's office."

"Not much!" said Hank, stepping out from cover, and holding the drop on the strange monk. "Ye don't pass hyar in that style."

"Then accompany us to headquarters, my man," said the monk.

"That 'u'd be sweet!—wouldn't it now?" said Hank, sarcastically. "An' leave this hyar pass open for the rest o' your gang to slide in! I'm a greeny, I am! I'm doin' jest that kind o' thing—in a hog's eye! Hold hard thar! Ef you try to skin by me, I'll let daylight through ye!"

In rapid succession he shot thrice into the air.

From one side of the plateau came a shrill whistle. Then a score of men rushed forward and surrounded the intruder, the majority getting between him and the mouth of the ravine by which he had entered.

But neither this ominous maneuver, nor their scowling brows and ready weapons, seemed to disturb the stranger, who regarded them coolly through the holes in his mask.

Two of their number were masked, and upon the slighter in build of these the Masked Monk

fixed his gaze a moment, his breast perceptibly rising with a deep inhalation.

But the other drew his attention by demanding:

"Well, what have we here?"

"A friend or foe, as you choose to make him," replied the Masked Monk, coolly.

"A very bold foe, it seems to me—"

"Then all the stancher friend, if you so elect. I seek Captain Mask."

"I am he! What do you wish?"

"A private interview."

"For the purpose of treachery, I presume!"

"Bah! could I not shoot you where you stand, were I so disposed?"

"And be dropped in your tracks the minute after, with twenty pellets of lead in your carcass!"

"I would not be here, if I were not willing to risk that. But, are you afraid of me, that you hesitate—"

"Neither of you nor of any man living! I will accord you the interview fast enough. But I warn you that if you fail to give a satisfactory account of yourself you will never leave this place alive—or dead!"

For answer the Masked Monk thrust his weapon beneath his gown, and with an impatient wave of the hand, said:

"Lead on! I like deeds better than words. Of course I understood my position before coming here."

"Accompany me, if you please."

Captain Mask led the way. The strange monk followed. Lieutenant Mask brought up the rear.

As Bob Bolton had foreseen, the men were thrown off their guard by the advent of their strange visitor. Consequently the bold adventurer had little difficulty in slipping inside the guard.

He might find it harder to get out again!

Calling into requisition all his skill in woodcraft, he glided from covert to covert, until he saw Captain Mask, his guest and lieutenant enter a log cabin hidden in the dense foliage of the chaparral.

He was working his way toward the open window, through which he hoped to overhear the conversation within, when he was suddenly startled by the sound of rustling leaves and a surprised:

"Hallo!"

At the same instant he discovered a man who had started to his elbow from a recumbent position on the ground.

There was a rush, a gurgling sound, a thud!—then dead silence!

Like a panther, Bob Bolton had sprung upon the man, throttled him, and knocked him senseless with the butt of his revolver, before the outlaw had a chance to raise an alarm.

Then he lay still, listening. But there was no indication that the brief struggle had attracted attention.

Cutting strips from the outlaw's jerkin with his bowie-knife, Bolton gagged and bound him, and drew his body into the bushes. But before leaving him he searched him and found a mask, which he adjusted to his own face.

This bold man, who carried his life in his

hand, coolly prepared for all contingencies; and the event proved the wisdom of his forethought.

A moment later he had gained the coveted position beneath the window, and was listening to the conversation within.

"This is my lieutenant, from whom I have no secrets," said Captain Mask, as he ushered his strange guest into the cabin, which consisted of a room on the ground floor, and an attic above.

"Very well, sir," replied the monk. "We will, at once, then, to business."

"To begin with, may I know whom I have the honor to entertain?" asked the chief of the outlaws.

"Let us respect each other's reserve, Captain Mask," replied the monk. "If I have a slight advantage over you in that respect, you must trust to your wit to get even with me."

Captain Mask bowed.

"Waiving that point for the present, how may I serve you?"

"By allowing me to serve you. It matters not how I may have learned what I am about to reveal of my knowledge of your purposes; nor do my motives concern any one but myself. Suffice it to say that I am prepared to strike hands with you, and prove the truest friend you ever had."

Both Captain Mask and his lieutenant regarded the speaker intently. The masks of all three hid the expression of their faces.

"And what do you know of my purposes?" asked Captain Mask.

"That you are plotting the removal of an obstacle which stands between you and a million dollars!"

"Hah!"

Both Captain Mask and his lieutenant started with a murmured ejaculation of surprise.

The monk chuckled softly.

"And you?" cried the captain.

"Propose to be the third in the *Masked League* against a girl and a boy who are scarcely more than children! One way of looking at it, it isn't very big business for three men, backed by a score of cut-throats; but then, perhaps the end gives it a certain dignity."

"And what share of the million do you expect—admitting that what you say is true?"

"Not a cent!"

"Where, then, is your advantage?"

"That is my secret."

"H'm! What guaranty have we of your fidelity, if we admit you to this league which you suggest?"

"What guaranty have you from any of your followers? I will give you the same pledges, and become a member of your band, only reserving for myself perfect freedom of action."

"One moment," said Captain Mask. "This way, lieutenant, if you please."

They drew apart, nearer the window.

At that moment there was a shout from without, then hurrying feet and loud voices followed a volley of small-arms and a shower of bullets; and a dark body shot through the window, fairly into the room.

The startled occupants saw a fourth masker

added to their number, and this of most hostile disposition, for he held a cocked revolver to Lieutenant Mask's head, while he cried:

"Hold! The drawing of a weapon against me seals the doom of your second in command!"

The road-agent whom Bob Bolton had bound and gagged was soon discovered by a companion, whom he was awaiting for the purpose of a "quiet game of draw," and realizing that detection was inevitable, the iron-hearted sheriff of Alameda county resolved upon and instantly executed a stroke whose boldness showed the master spirit.

As he leaped through the window, he was followed by a shower of bullets. An instant later the opening was filled with passion-inflamed faces, and on the other side of the room the door was thrown open and thronged by half a score of burly cut-throats, revolver in hand.

The Solid Little Man was in a tight box—"and don't you forget it!"

CHAPTER VIII.

OLD RAMSHACKLE PEG-LEG.

"WAAL, dog my cats, ef this hyar ain't a teaser! Ef she wants ter blow, why, let 'er blow! Ef she wants ter snow, why, let 'er snow! But blow an' snow, an' snow an' blow, a-drivin' of ten thousand pins an' needles inter yer eyes an' ears, whichever way ye turn—I'll be eternally hornswaggled ef that thar ain't jest a-pilin' of it on to beat the patience of ary backslidin' Christian! It's a-goin' fur to be as dark as a stack o' black cats, to-night. An' cold? Ya-zoo blizzards! A squar' nite o' this hyar weather 'u'd rim-rack an' shack the devil's kingdom, an' bu'st the ice business down below all to flinders!"

"Ge-lang, thar, Jinny! Stiddy, ole gal! What in blazes has got inter ye? Ge-lang, I say!"

Imagine a wooden-legged Kris-kringle, seated before two wicker hampers on the back of the sorriest mule that ever was, carrying her head near the ground, with her long ears flapping limp on either side, and having the appearance of being ever on the point of falling to sleep, and you have a fair picture of Old Ramshackle Peg-leg and his faithful "Jinny."

When the latter stopped within the shelter of a rock which cut off the icy blast and driving snow, and from which no goading of her master's one remaining heel nor lashing of the bridle-rein would induce her to move a step, Old Ramshackle waxed reproachful, and said:

"Jinny, my gal, air you goin' back on the ole man? Air you a-goin' fur to leave him out hyar in the cold, on a night that 'u'd freeze the tail off of a cast iron monkey?—a night that'll knock the socks off o' the Conglomerated Side-shows, now mind I tell ye! Air you a-goin' fur to do it, Jinny? Mariar wouldn't be that on-grateful. Sh—"

"Mariar! Mariar! You're a liar—you're a liar!" cried a muffled voice, the source of which an observer would have been puzzled to determine.

But neither Old Ramshackle nor Jinny betrayed any surprise at this interruption; and, as if to show that she had steeled her heart

against entreaties as well as commands, the latter quietly gathered her feet under her and lay down, heaving a long-drawn sigh in token of her content, and leaving her master standing astride of her recumbent body.

"Waal," soliloquized Old Ramshackle, with a resigned shake of his head, "I reckon all female critturs is purty muchly alike. When they gits their heads sot contrariwise, thar ain't no makin' nothin' out of 'em, noways!"

"But ye needn't add insult to injury, Mariar," he pursued, as addressing an invisible listener; "'cause we're all in the same box, an' you women critturs can't shake the ole man without holdin' yer own no es to the grindstun!"

With a bored yawn, the muffled voice asked: ?

"Ain't it a good while between drinks? Thank-ee, sir! thankee! I'll take mine straight."

As if reminded of a forgotten friend, Old Ramshackle drew from his pocket a flat black bottle labeled, "BLUE RUIN!" which he patted affectionately, while his face relaxed in a smile.

"Suky Sweetlips, my gal, you're the ole man's only comfort! In joy an' sorrer, in sunshine an' shadder, you never shakes him!"

And drawing the cork, he saluted the charmer with a long, passionate caress.

"Waal," he continued, restoring Suky to his pocket, "ef we've got to stay hyar all night—an' I reckon Jinny's sot her mind to it—we mought as well be as comfortable as possible. I allow a lay-out between a boomin' fire an' this hyar rock won't be so bad."

In a few minutes he had a crackling fire of pine cones and twigs, which he kicked from beneath the snow.

While thus gathering fuel to last through the night he stopped suddenly and listened.

Presently, during a lull in the wind, he heard again the faint cry:

"Help! Help! Help!"

"Somebody in trouble hereaway!"

And dropping his pine fagots he stumped off through the snow.

"Hallo! Hallo! Hallo!" he cried.

No answer, save the echo of his own hail.

"Curious!" muttered the old fellow. "Air the ole man gittin' earwigs or snakes in his boots? Nary! It ain't in the Peg-leg breed to knock under to ary liquor that—Geeswizzlum jinks!"

In the gloom Old Ramshackle had come suddenly upon a dark object outlined in the snow.

"Waal, I'll be gosh-hanged to dodrotternation!" he cried, as he made out the motionless forms of Alf and Claire. "If this hyar young flat ain't laid out fur the long snooze!—him an' his gal! But he wa'n't no slouch. He peeled hisself to tuck her up tidy! Baal, Beelzebub an' Apollyon! but she's a screamer in the petticoat line! It's a blasted shame to whale her as I've got to. But I allow life, liberty an' the pursuit o' happiness comes fu'st in this hyar great an' glorious republick. So, my gal, I'll larrup ye ontel you're ten degrees above the b'ilin' pint!"

With difficulty he drew poor Claire from the fast-stiffening arms of her lover-husband, and ran with her, as fast as he could stomp it with his wooden leg through the snow, to the rock before which he had built a fire.

"I rushy Jane Spitfire Peg-leg," he cried,

"now's the best show ye ever had fur a red-hot tongue-lashin'! Lay it on, ole gal! Cl'ar the kitchen an' give the ole woman a chance to wag her tongue, an' it'll take the kinks out of her ole back ontel ye'd think she was a giddy gal ag'in!"

Drawing a hickory ramrod from his long flintlock, Old Ramshackle began to whip Claire with it vigorously.

"Sail round byar, my beauty! Sleepy, air ye? Waal, I'll *wake ye up*—bet a mule! Take that! an' that! an' that! an' that! Mighty cold, eh? Waal, I'll *warm ye*!"

"Knocketty, stricketty, slappetty crack!
Rappetty, tappetty, whippetty, whack!"

Ain't thar music in that? That sets the blood to dancin'! The Ole Boy hisself couldn't sleep to sich rockin'!"

"Hello, ole man! What the deuce is the row? What's the row? What's the row?" cried the muffled voice, excitedly.

But paying no heed, Old Ramshackle Peg-leg continued a perfect shower of blows all over Claire's body, as he held her by the shoulder.

At last this heroic remedy began to have an effect. The girl writhed beneath the stinging lash, and cried out, at first in unintelligible, inarticulate mutterings, but soon in clear, ringing protest.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Let me go! Oh! you cruel wretch! Help! Help! Help! Alf! Oh, Alf! Where are you?"

"Go it, ole gal!" shouted the muffled voice.

"Alf, is it?" said Old Ramshackle. "He's havin' a high ole snooze out yander, all by hisself. But we'll sp'ile his fun presently!"

And seeing that the girl was thoroughly aroused, he desisted from his mercifully-merciless flagellation, laying aside his ramrod, and drawing forth his bottle of "blue ruin."

"Take a sup o' this hyar, my dear," he said, addressing Claire kindly, though she shrunk from him in fear. "Suky Peg-leg's yer best friend now. Don't be afeared o' me. I had ter whale yer like blazes, ur let ye die out thar in the snowdrift. Take a sup o' this, now; an' then we'll sot ye down between the fire an' the rock, while we goes out an' packs in Mr. Alf."

"Alf? Alf?" cried the girl, catching at the name, where is he?"

"Out yander, sleepin' hisself to death—turning his stummick into a patent ice house."

The whole situation flashed upon Claire at once, and she cried:

"Oh, let us lose no time, but go at once!"

She attempted to rise, but found that she grew faint and giddy, while her limbs refused their accustomed office.

"You stay whar ye be," admonished Old Ramshackle, and once more stumped forth in the snow, this time ramrod in hand, where he was soon sweating with his exertions in "tanning Alf's jacket."

As the youth regained consciousness, he became pugnacious; but Old Ramshackle Peg-leg proved that his muscles were of steel, and kept "trouncing" his victim until he was out of breath.

"That'll l'arn ye not to go to sleep in no snow-bank," he said, as Alf, released, stood off glar-

ing at him. "Wanted to freeze to death, did ye? All right! Now freeze, and be banged to ye! Them licks was fur lettin' the leetle gal freeze, too."

"Claire!" gasped Alf, looking around wildly.

"Is over yander by the fire, waitin' fur ye—no thanks to you, though!"

"Let me out! Let me out! Eoo-oo-oo! it's cold! Air ye goin' to let me freeze to death? Ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! ha! Mariar! Mariar! You're a copper-bottomed liar!"

Old Ramshackle Peg-leg grinned at the surprise of his guests, and said:

"I'll have to interjuce my fam'ly."

"Takin' us, lock, stock, an' bar'l," he began, with a comprehensive wave of his hand, "we're the Conglomerated Side-shows o' this hyar great an' glorious North America! This hyar, ladies an' gentlemen"—indicating the now dozing mule—"air the world-renowned Pegasus Bucephalus Peg-leg, the rampageous rip-snorter o' the Rocky Mountains! (I calls her Jinny, fur short.) She's an innercent-lockin' critter, as ye all parceive; but she kin bray louder, kick harder, an' git away with tougher grub than ary mule this side o' sundown! Boot-legs?—pinecones?—candle-boxes?"

But Old Ramshackle's eulogy was cut short by a voice crying:

"Cheese it, cully? What air ye givin' us?"

"Now that thar's jealousy," said Old Ramshackle. "That thar Jezebel, Mariar, never kin b'ar a good word fur Jinny."

And Old Ramshackle removed one of the wicker hampers, which proved to be a cage containing a parrot, the barred side being next the mule's body, for the sake of warmth.

Mariar blinked her eyes at the firelight, cocked her head on one side, then on the other, and asked, gravely:

"Who said whisky?"

Claire clapped her hands in delight.

"What a comical creature!" she cried, laughing.

"Beggin' yer pardon, she's like most of her sect," said Old Ramshackle—"she swings a powerful free tongue!"

"Drunk ag'in!" sighed Mariar, blinking her eye critically at her master.

But before her impertinence could be re-proved, all were startled by a long-drawn howl.

"That means wolves!" said Old Ramshackle.

"An' mighty hungry they'll be, just about now! Boyee, we'll have to git more fodder fer that fire. We may have to fight 'em with fagots."

Alf seconded his preserver with a will; and soon they had quite a pile of fuel.

But momentarily the howling had increased, until an immense pack seemed to be charging down a mountain gorge, straight for the spot occupied by our friends.

Then above the Babel rose the sharp crack of firearms and the ring of clattering hoofs.

"Baal, Belzebub, an' Apollyon! ef some on-lucky scalawag ain't bein' run by the varmints!" cried Old Ramshackle, excitedly.

The mule had awaked, and was now hugging close to the rock. The parrot screamed its store of sentences. Claire, pale and trembling, crept close to her husband's side. Alf's face was alight with courageous purpose.

"The poor fellow is coming this way. Can't we help him?" he asked.

"Wait! Maybe we kin," replied Old Ramshackle. "Git ready to grab half a dozen blazing fagots."

There was a moment of terrible suspense, while the flying horseman and his ravenous pursuers swept on down the gorge.

Nearer! nearer! until they had almost reached the fire, their only haven of security, when there came a shrill cry, different from the howls of the wolves, and the rout suddenly came to a stop.

"That thar's the death-cry of a hoss! He's down! Now's our time!" shouted Old Ramshackle. "Follow me, my boyee!"

And seizing several pine-knots from the fire, he rushed into the howling storm.

Claire cried:

"Oh, Alf!"

And would have clung to him in affright, but he shook her off.

"Throw more fuel on the fire!" he cried, as, snatching up both hands full, he rushed after Old Ramshackle.

CHAPTER IX.

A DOUBTFUL GUEST.

HAVING the advantage of two sound legs, Alf was first on the scene, to discover a man floundering in the snow, with the teeth of a huge mountain-wolf already buried in his shoulder.

Close at hand a horse was struggling, but hidden from sight by the bodies of the beasts that had piled upon it pell-mell.

Bounding to the side of the man, Alf yelled at the top of his voice, and waving the fagots in one hand, thrust those in the other into the very face of the wolf which had begun to tear the prostrate man.

Old Ramshackle, too, scattered his fagots right and left, prudently reserving two, however.

By this vigorous assault the wolves were held at bay a few seconds, in which the stranger scrambled to his feet.

"Now back to camp!" cried Old Ramshackle.

And the perilous retreat began.

Turning, they found that they were entirely surrounded by snapping teeth and eyes that glowed like coals of fire.

Only their waving torches kept this living, leaping wall at a little distance.

The din was blood-curdling!

Old Ramshackle charged ahead as fast as he could stump it.

Alf guarded the rear.

The stranger, also facing toward the fire, where Claire could be seen peering wild-eyed after her imperiled loved one, used his revolvers until the chambers were empty.

Then he seized a dead wolf by the hind legs, and swinging its body like a club, charged its fellows boldly.

They had nearly gained the fire, when Alf, running backward, stumbled and fell, and his fagots, dashed to the ground, were extinguished.

With savage snarls the wolves leaped forward.

Old Ramshackle turned and dashed his torches among them.

The wolves were driven back, falling over one another; but in the struggle one torch was put out and the other burned dimly.

A moment, and our friends would be devoured!

Then came a cry of agony from the fire and Claire rushed forth with blazing fagots in either hand!

Forgetful of self—seeing only the peril of him she loved so well—she sprung among the wolves, scattering them right and left, until she gained the side of her husband.

There her strength failed.

The stranger caught the knots just as they were about to fall from her hands to the ground.

Alf received his devoted wife in his arms.

A moment later the fire was gained, and all were safe.

But, as the stranger gazed from the unconscious girl to the youth who was making distracted efforts to restore her to consciousness, while he mingled caresses with words of endearment and praises of her courage, a cruel, crafty smile came into his hang-dog countenance.

Although they had rescued him from death, he might yet prove their worst foe!

Perhaps Old Ramshackle detected something of this look; for he said, rather aggressively:

"You've had a powerful cluss call, I reckon, stranger."

"You're mighty right, ole man," admitted the rescued. "I owe you a lift, ef the chance is ever throwed in my way."

"Set it down to the boy's account, ef so be ye feel anyways beholden," said Old Ramshackle. "Ef it hadn't been fur him, you'd be *nowhar* jest about this time o' day. But, I say—who in Cain air you, anyway?"

This rather inhospitable demand met with an unexpected response from one who had evidently been trained to reply to this question; for Mariar answered:

"A — scoundrel!"

But the stranger preferred to answer for himself.

"Me?" he replied, half scowling, yet preserving his temper. "I'm Jem Ludlow, at yer service."

"H'm!" grunted the old man, "Minin', prospectin', or layin' around loose?"

"I'm *lookin' fur work!*" replied Mr. Ludlow, with a certain deliberate emphasis which showed that this pointed catechising didn't "set well. Is thar anything else you'd like to know?"

"P'r'aps thar is—p'r'aps thar ain't!" said the old man. "Howsomedever, we won't take no more jest now. But, ef ye're so inclined, I reckon we'd better fall to an' have somethin' to eat, jest by way to tantalizin' them skehonema-donks out yonder."

For out in the storm, in a semicircle, as near as they dared to approach the fire, could be seen the skulking forms, the gleaming teeth and coal-like eyes of the wolves, who made the night hideous with their howls.

When she had recovered consciousness, Claire could not take her eyes off them as she cowered

close to her husband's side; but Old Ramshackle and Jem Ludlow lay down and slept soundly through the night, leaving the wakeful ones to replenish the fire.

The morning light drove the night-prowlers to their dens, and the rescued man took his departure.

Claire looked after the man with a strange light in her eyes, and said:

"Alf, I'm afraid of him! Did you notice how he looked at us?"

Whether or not he shared her fears, Alf tried to reassure her.

"He could not harm us after the service we rendered him," he said.

But for all that, he resolved to take Old Ramshackle into his confidence.

"Look a-hyar," suggested Old Ramshackle, having listened to his story. "Suppose we rig her out as a boy, an' you two j'ine the Conglomerated Sideshows! I reckon that'll knock their calculations, ontel you git out o' this part o' the country."

Then, in his turn, he explained that he was traveling from camp to camp with his educated mule and parrot.

"Why, bless yer eyes," he concluded, "we're a hull circus! I'm a band o' music all by myself! Thar hain't no sich show west o' the Mississippi, nor east of it, nuther, I reckon!"

And diving into one of his hampers, he produced instruments which he adjusted in various ways about his lody, until, as he said, he was indeed a band of music (such as it was!) by himself.

"But what part could we take?" asked Alf, amused by the novel performance.

"Waal, now, look a-hyar," said the old man, confidentially. "Ye see thar's only one thing in the way o' my gittin' as rich as all git-out. That thar's Suky Sweetlips!"

And he held up his bottle of "blue ruin."

"Ef you'd see that the ole man got jest enough to grease his j'int, but not enough to flummix him, I reckon you'd 'arn the keep o' yerself an' the leetle gal twice over. When the ole man's drunk—"

"Drunk ag'in! Set 'em up for the boys! Ha! ha! ha! Mariar! Mariar—"

"Dry up!" thundered Old Ramshackle; and muttering in her throat, Mariar "subsided."

"Ye see," pursued the old fellow, with odd humility, "the boys gits the ole man drunk, an' then goes through him—with keerds, ye onderstand. Oh, it's all squar' on the face of it, but it's a blasted swindle underneath! Now, ef so be you could handle the funds o' the consarn, an' let the ole man have what was good fur him, I allow we could gee jest handsome. Come!—what d'ye say?"

Two days later the Consolidated Sideshows, augmented by "Peg-leg's Pets," one of whom appeared to be a remarkably handsome boy, entered the shanty city of Hard Pan.

In the door of the Go-as-ye-please Saloon stood Mr. Jem Ludlow, whose basilisk eyes suddenly lighted up with a baleful gleam.

"Look a-hyar," said Old Ramshackle, taking him aside, "ye never seen us afore! D'ye onderstand?"

"Oh, of course not, boss!" replied Mr. Ludlow, with his tongue in his cheek. "You kin tie to me! I never go nosin' around my neighbor's dump."

Notwithstanding this assurance, his eyes sought again and again Claire's beautiful face, and ever with a light that boded her no good.

He saw her turn pale and grasp Alf's arm, as a man in the dandy dress of the mines passed them. He saw her white lips whisper:

"Oh, Alf!—our worst enemy!"

CHAPTER X.

A BOLD ABDUCTION.

"STAND fast, my bantling!" Rob cried Bolton, as Lieutenant Mask uttered a shrill cry in a boyish treble, and would have leaped away, but for the iron hand of the plucky sberiff. "You'll find it safest in the end. See! your friends are in no danger of sacrificing you for the gratification of laying me out. Do you think I'm a fool to go it blind in such a game as this? I'll show you that I've got a dead open-and-shut on these grinnin' hyenas."

Bob Bolton had ample time for this speech, since Captain Mask sprung toward the window with uplifted hand, crying:

"Hold! Not a shot!"

Strange to say, the Masked Monk seemed equally excited, for regardless of the danger to himself, he sprung before the door, extending his arms, so that his flowing sleeves intercepted the view of the men, while he cried:

"Stop! Don't shoot! The life of your lieutenant depends upon it!"

In an instant the danger was past. The men lowered their weapons and looked to their leader, sudden silence falling upon the Babel of uncouth sounds.

As if ashamed of his manifestations of fear, Lieutenant Mask drew himself erect and shouted:

"Do not mind me! Shoot the spy where he stands!"

But all now grasped the situation, and remained passive.

Bob Bolton chuckled softly behind his mask.

"Twenty to one! Why don't you mount me, gentlemen?" he asked.

Captain Mask's eyes glittered through the holes in his mask, as he turned them upon the monk, and his voice shook with wrathful suspicion.

"Is this a part of your plot?" he demanded.

"No," replied the monk. "I was as unprepared for this intrusion as you. This man is a stranger to me. Let him speak for himself."

"Well, sir, what have you to say for yourself?"—turning to the man whose advent had been so tempestuous.

"That I always play a lone hand! That I'd scorn to assist such a dirty knave as yonder rascal, who ought to be scourged for the sacrilege of putting a holy habit to such vile use!"

"But why are you here?"

"For a purpose of my own."

"And being here what do you intend to do?"

"Walk out again, with your band of knaves as an escort."

"Never!"

"We'll see about that!"

"What! do you think that we will let you walk off with the secret of our retreat? Why, we are twenty to one!"

"Exactly. But I hold the little joker; and nothing in the deck takes that, you know!"

"By Heaven, sir—"

"Come! come! the thing simmers down to just this:—You can knock me over the moment you choose; but you can't kill me so quick that I won't have time to pull this trigger, which settles your lieutenant. For his sake you will all form in line, and march before me until I am out of this trap. And you'll do the thing up straight, too, knowing that the instant I suspect treachery I will lay him out *sure*, and then do my level best to send you after him. The members of your band, who are of no account, *in your estimation and in mine*, will march first. You will walk immediately in front of your lieutenant, say three or four paces. Come, sir! form my escort into line. It's a pity that such infamous rascals should walk before an honest man!"

Captain Mask knew when he was beat. He choked with fury, but he managed to say:

"Do you pledge your word not to harm my lieutenant, if we accede to your insolent demand?"

"I pledge nothing. Do as I command you, and at once!"

"Oh, this is infamous!" cried Lieutenant Mask.

And, reckless of consequences, he snatched a revolver from his belt.

But with a lightning trip the iron-hearted sheriff hurled the impetuous youth to the floor, and with his left hand snatched the revolver from his grasp.

"In God's name! do nothing rash, Hor—"

But there he checked himself.

"Am I to be obeyed?" thundered Bob Bolton.

The muzzle of his revolver was against the temple of the youth whose life he held at his finger-tip. His eyes now gleamed ominously through the holes in his mask. His voice had a ring of deadly purpose in it.

"Form in line, my men!" commanded Captain Mask.

Sullenly the men obeyed.

"Detail one of your men to saddle the fleetest horse in your possession. Don't fool with me. I know a horse when I see him. I shall also require a led horse, which you may saddle or not, as you choose; I may have to kill one or both of them, in order to get where I want to go, in the time that I wish to make it in."

The horses were brought forth and put through their paces.

"That will do," said the sheriff. "Now, forward, march!"

And down the ravine proceeded the strangest procession that was ever seen in the mountains, one man swaying at his will twenty, all of whom thirsted for his blood.

Some two miles from the stronghold they came to a broad trail. Here Bob Bolton commanded the outlaws to march forty rods away,

while he still held their lieutenant covered with his revolver, beside the horses.

"One word in parting," said Captain Mask, husky with rage. "I'll be even with you for this, if it takes the longest day I live."

"All right!" laughed the Solid Little Man. "You're welcome to try."

"And I, too!" said the Masked Monk, and his voice shook with an intensity of passion that caused both Captain Mask and his lieutenant to look at him in wonder. Why did he take such an interest in a stranger?

"The more the merrier," responded Alameda's sheriff. "But let me suggest a nugget of wisdom. *Catch your bird before you pluck it!* And now, if you will retire—"

When they had reached the distance indicated, the outlaws turned round.

They were just in time to see Bob Bolton leap into the saddle, then stoop suddenly, catch Lieutenant Mask beneath the arms, and swing him into a seat on his horse's withers.

The next instant the bold abductor was dashing away, followed by his led horse, which, no doubt, he soon intended to put to good use.

A startled cry of the astonished lieutenant and the mocking laugh of the Solid Little Man came to their ears. The outlaws stood dumfounded, then, with howls of rage, set out in headlong pursuit.

Pell-mell rushed the outwitted road-agents after the bold abductor.

But their first discovery was that the Masked Monk was outstripping all the rest, though impeded by the flapping skirts of his gown, which he had hastily gathered up about his waist.

The same thought occurred to all, and the cry went up:

"Stop the traitor! Down the spying monk!"

And the rocks rung with pistol reports, and a shower of bullets whistled in pursuit.

The monk fell upon his face!

His fall was greeted by a yell of triumph.

A moment later he was surrounded. But, behold! the supposed dead man leaped to his feet.

"Hold!" he shouted. "Are you insane? Cannot you see that I am as eager to overtake yonder devil as any of you?"

"Yes, boss—a leetle *too* eager, I reckon! Maybe, now, he's your pard."

"Fools! I never saw him before! But the lady—"

"*Stay!*" thundered Captain Mask. "We are wasting time. To horse—to horse! We cannot overtake him on foot."

"Trust me!" cried the Masked Monk, seizing upon Captain Mask's hand and speaking in a voice of intense earnestness. "I swear to you that our interests in *this* are identical!"

These thoughts flashed through Captain Mask's brain like lightning:

"This man, whoever he is, knows Hortense, and is in love with her!"

Aloud he said:

"I believe you! Men, this is one of us. All his commands, looking to the recovery of Lieutenant Mask, must be obeyed. Now for horses!"

"Thank God! You shall never regret this!" murmured the Masked Monk.

Twenty minutes later the ravine rung with the clang of iron hoofs.

Meanwhile, Bob Bolton addressed Lieutenant Mask, whom he had so boldly snatched from the very midst of his accomplices in crime.

"Now, Miss Ashurst—I may as well call you by your proper name, since your disguise is no disguise to me—whether you were accessory to the murder of Stephen Rensalier, your uncle by marriage, I don't know. I rather think not, since you would have married the old man inside of twenty-four hours, and thus gained all there was to make, without the risk of crime. But I know that out of spite you came near having Alf Cheswick strung up by a mob, by accusing him, when your own brother, Patent-leather Joe, was the real criminal.

"To save Alf Cheswick's life, I let the boy floor me, and shake me, and make me *chaw dirt*, right before all the boys!—a thing that no man ever done before. But I swore then that I'd nail Patent-leather Joe, and fetch him in, so's to prove to the boys that it was all a dodge, and that I was gettin' away with *them*, when my nose was flattened in the road.

"This is the first step. Next time I'll fetch Joe—bet your bottom dollar!"

Thus far Hortense Ashurst had listened without interruption. Now she asked, in a voice that betrayed no womanly timidity:

"Who are you?"

"Bob Bolton, Sheriff of Alameda County, Californy!"

And the Solid Little Man removed his mask, discovering his bold, resolute face.

"And what do you intend to do with me?"

"First, request you politely to remove your needless mask."

Hortense complied at once; then paid her captor glance for glance in proud defiance.

"I would be more at my ease if you would permit me to ride one of the horses by myself," she said.

"That was my reason for getting two."

And halting a moment the change was effected.

"And my destination?" asked Hortense.

"Is a place of perfect security. Not a mining-camp; for there are always roughs who could be bought or manipulated into conniving at your escape; but a mountain cave, the secret of which I alone shall possess, so that your friends will not dare to kill me, lest you die of starvation—don't you see?"

On the following day Bob Bolton entered Hard Pan, entirely changed in appearance.

The first persons he met of any interest to him were Alf Cheswick and Claire, whom he recognized in Old Ramshackle Peg-leg's Pets, in spite of their disguise. The next was their mortal enemy, Patent-leather Joe, in the "dandy rig" of the mines!

CHAPTER XI.

"DOUSE THE GLIM!"

PATENT-LEATHER JOE, *alias* Captain Mask, and known in Hard Pan only as the Dandy Sharp, sat in the Go-as-you-please Saloon, play-

ing a "blind" game of poker with Mr. Jem Ludlow. The pasteboards were manipulated deftly, and money passed across the board.

"The gal's in boy's togs, an' looks slap-up, too," the latter was saying. "But look a-hyar, Cap."

"Well?"

"You ain't goin' to wipe them out—*clean out*?"

"Eh?"

Patent-leather Joe looked up quickly, and eyed his man curiously.

"You ain't getting tender-hearted, Scowler?" he asked, incredulously.

"Waal, ye see, Cap, I was down on my back, with a wolf's fangs in my shoulder, and a hundred more ready to chew me into mince-meat, an' the boy pulled me through. It's playin' it low down to double-bank him an' his gal, after that. But ef so be you say—"

"I do say it! Get the boys together. We must capture that girl to-night. Give the boy—curse him!—a high lot; but not a hair of the girl's must be hurt—you understand?"

Later the Masked Monk confronted Pete Larrabee just outside of town.

"See here," he said, abruptly changing his line of catechism, "who is this Dandy Sharp?"

"That's our town agent. The Cap gits points from him."

"Is he an officer of the band?"

"I never seen him at headquarters. Reckon he only plays behind the curtain. He thinks a heap of himself—he does."

"That will do. Pass on."

The monk waited for the road-agent to disappear. Then he left the trail and was lost among the undergrowth.

That night Old Ramshackle Peg-leg had secured the Go-as-you-please Saloon for his entertainment, one end being reserved for the "side-shows," the other for the audience.

It is perhaps needless to say that the latter had the bar on their side!

The boys expected no very artistic performance, but thought that the "circus" would consist in chaffing the old man, in which sundry vegetables, *mellow* and *odorous* at least, were to take the place of bouquets.

"An' now, gents," said Old Ramshackle, "while the band plays an overture, a collection will be taken up at four bits a head. Pass the hats, my pets."

At his back Old Ramshackle had a base-drum, triangle, and cymbals, which were worked by one foot. The same motion pumped the air for a set of bag-pipes, the keys of which employed both hands. To his elbows were strapped the sticks of a snare drum, which was secured at his back. Finally, a pipe-of-pan, or mouth-organ, rested against his breast, so that he could run his mouth back and forth over it; while bells depended from every part of his fantastic dress, to jingle with every motion of his body.

This novel orchestration received rounds of boisterous applause, for the old fellow displayed considerable skill, and the boys dropped their four bits into the hat ungrudgingly.

Patent-Leather Joe placed himself so that Claire came to him. He saw her tremble and grow pale, though she had nerved herself for this ordeal.

"By Jove! it is he!" he muttered, when she had passed. "She recognized me. But the little thing has pluck!"

Then he looked up and caught Alf Cheswick's eye upon him; and this road-agent, who spread terror as far as his name reached—this man who had faced death in a hundred forms, unflinchingly—now felt the blood leave his face, while that strange trepidation with which this boy always inspired him crept over him with an icy chill.

"Curse him! They have their instructions. He must be killed to-night. I shall never know a moment's perfect ease until it is accomplished. Then I will secure her. By Heaven! she shall be my queen! She grows lovelier in every new disguise. A million! I'd give it all to possess the love she gives him!"

But the collection now being taken up, the overture came to an end; and while the boys were indulging in "heel-taps," their attention was diverted by a scream of shrill laughter which rung out above the hubbub.

Old Ramshackle turned with simulated surprise to the parrot, which indicated to the audience whence the laughter had proceeded, and they at once became quiet.

"Why, Mariar, what's broke loose?" asked the old fellow.

"This ole bummer's a D. D.! Who'd 'a' thunk it? Who'd 'a' thunk it? Hal hal ha!" screamed the bird.

"A D. D.?—a D. D.?" repeated Old Ramshackle, as if puzzled.

"*Darn Dry!*" exclaimed Mariar, whose unconscious profanity we euphemize for ears polite.

But the boys roared with laughter at the rough joke. To them its profanity gave it more point.

"Waal, I sw'ar!" shouted one. "Ef that thar ain't the cutest I ever heard! Look a-hyar, ole man, what'll ye take fur the outfit?"

But the barkeeper "dropped" to the suggestion contained in Mariar's speech and "came down" with the liquor.

As Old Ramshackle received it with his most beaming smile and best bow, he assured the company in general and the would-be purchaser in particular that Mariar was not for sale.

"The next thing on the programme, gents," he continued, "is a solo, by Pegasus Bucephalus Peg-leg! (I calls her Jinny, fur short.)"

Jinny stood meekly with her ears drooping on either side of her head, while her master proceeded in her praise:

"This hyar critter what ye see before ye air a descendant o' the mule what Balaam rode to market. She kin kick the stuffin' out of an airthquake. She kin eat anything from ole boot-tops to ten-penny nails. I reckon she could 'a' bolted Jonah arter he'd swallowed the whale! But sing? Why, in Californy thar was a bird-fancier what had a lot o' nightingales what he'd got from the Sandwich Islands. Waal, ef you'd believe me, we got up a singing mill between them thar nightingales an' Jinny, hyar; an' they bu'sted theirselves—*fact!*—bu'sted theirselves a-singin' an' never touched her with a forty-foot pole!"

"The ole man's givin' ye wind!" affirmed Mariar.

Old Ramshackle affected exaggerated indignation; and the boys laughed at his expense.

Then came Jinny's "solo" in which the animal squatted on her haunches, and lifting her muzzle toward the ceiling, brayed until the room rung again.

The boys were delighted, and added their laughter and the pounding of their heavy boots to the horrid din.

At this moment a potato, in a very imperfect state of preservation, whizzed across the room and struck the fair minstrel on the proboscis, spattering in every direction.

But the boys, finding more in the entertainment than they had expected, were not yet ready for that part of the fun, and rose in hot indignation to throw the offender into the street.

This was the moment for which Patent-leather Joe's men were waiting. In an instant the wildest commotion prevailed.

"Douse the glim!" shouted a voice—nobody knew whose.

Then the lights went out.

Alf Cheswick caught the gleam of a knife, and felt a heavy hand strike his breast. As his senses were leaving him, he heard a woman's shriek rise above the din; and he sunk to the floor, murmuring:

"Claire!"

CHAPTER XII.

A BOLD RESCUE.

BOB BOLTON sat in the Go-as-ye please Saloon where he could keep an eye on the Dandy Sharp of Hard Pan.

"There'll be devil's work here to-night," he reflected. "But whom can I trust? The first man I appeal to may be a member of that accursed band of cut-throats, and betray me to my death. No; I must play a lone hand."

At this moment a man entered the saloon, and placing himself at a table in the corner, called for liquor and cigars.

Bob Bolton was electrified. Where had he seen this man before? He noted the military bearing. The stranger wore a long, navy-blue cloak. While his back was toward the sheriff, Bob Bolton caught an outline of the figure, and like a flash came the recognition:

"The Masked Monk!"

Alameda's sheriff studied the face with deep interest. It was worn with anxiety, the eyes glowing like coals, as they roved restlessly about the room.

Bob smiled internally.

"You're not the only one who was disappointed in finding her!" he mused.

But the face seemed familiar; and after long, furtive study, Bob placed it. He had seen this man in Poker Pocket, on that eventful night when, from being at the mercy of the Vigilantes, with a rope round his neck, Capt. Arizona had turned the tables and captured the town with his band of road-agents.

Meanwhile, Old Ramshackle's entertainment progressed, until the simultaneous extinction of the lights showed Bob Bolton that it was by a preconcerted plan.

He heard Claire's scream, and in the darkness

tried to make his way to her side. But a score of jostling bodies intervened.

The room rung with pistol-shots, oaths, groans, and strange cries. The mule began to kick viciously. The excited crowd surged back and forth, overturning and breaking benches and tables, and crashing through door and windows to make its escape.

The instant the lights went out, Claire felt herself caught about the waist and lifted from her feet. One scream escaped her lips; then a hand of iron closed over her mouth.

An instant she struggled frantically, fruitlessly; then fainted away.

One of Captain Mask's minions bore her into the open air. In the outer darkness he produced a peculiar hissing sound.

It was repeated from several points, and he was almost immediately joined by half a dozen men.

"This way, boys! I've got her!" he muttered; and they all fled rapidly in the darkness.

Meanwhile, Bob Bolton had had his eyes, and wits as well, about him. Not knowing what scheme would be adopted, he had marked his men, and was ready to take advantage of any chance.

As he gained the outside of the building, he heard the hissing sound. One of the men was beside him.

The sheriff knew that this was a signal. He too hissed, that he might be taken for one of the road-agents.

His ruse was successful.

"Hallo, pard," said the man, peering at him in the darkness. "This way. Scowler has nabbed the gal, fur sure."

"All right. Push ahead," replied Bolton; and he stumbled.

This momentary pause brought the road-agent a pace before him.

With a bound the sheriff leaped upon him, and knocked him senseless.

Then he sped on round the corner of the house.

He saw a man bearing a burden in his arms. The next instant he was one of the group who had gathered around the abductor.

In the darkness there was no distinguishing person. Calculating on this, the bold sheriff carried his life in his hand.

At a little distance they found several horses hitched in a chaparral.

Hastily they mounted, Bob Bolton not being the last in the saddle.

Boldly he placed himself on one side of the horse which held Claire, Scowler, her abductor, supporting her on the other side.

A moment later they were joined by Captain Mask, who bore no resemblance in dress to the Dandy Sharp, who had left the saloon a moment before the row took place.

"All right, boys?" he asked, guardedly.

"All right!" they responded.

"Then forward!"

And the little cavalcade dashed from the chaparral, and took the trail leading deeper into the mountains.

Now, Old Ramshackle Peg-leg was nobody's fool. He had been saluted with veteran potatoes, and even antiquated eggs, in his time. But

that the lights should be extinguished simultaneously was no accident.

"That devil has betrayed the kids!" was his reflection, "and their enemies have pulled the gal in!"

In a twinkling he was out of the house. He caught a glimpse of a body of men disappearing in the darkness, then heard the clatter of retreating horsemen.

"Hard-Pan-ites to the rescue!" he shouted, lustily. "This is a skin game of Captain Mask's gang! They have run off one o' my pets! To the rescue!—to the rescue!"

In the confusion he at last made himself heard and understood. Then there was mounting in hot haste and a pell-mell pursuit.

There were honest men in Hard Pan; and when they learned that a woman had been abducted, they swore oaths both loud and deep to rescue her and punish her enemies.

"Boys," cried Captain Mask, hearing the clatter of hoofs behind, "we are being pursued. Whatever comes, we must not lose our prize. All but Scowler and I will go to the left, at the forks. Draw them into ambush at the Crevasse, if you do not throw them off the scent before; and I will join you as soon as I have my bird caged."

"Here—give me this place."

And he forced his horse between Bob Bolton and Claire.

Bob yielded, and fell a little behind.

But the sheriff had not thrown away the minutes he had spent beside the girl.

She had recovered consciousness almost as soon as she was placed in the saddle. She felt her hand grasped by one of her captors, and pressed several times in rapid succession, as if it were a signal. Then a small pistol was thrust into her hand.

She knew then that a friend was at her side, and was instantly on her guard to assist him, when he made the attempt to effect her rescue.

Quickly secreting the weapon in her trousers pocket—it will be remembered that she was disguised as a boy—she waited.

Being displaced by Captain Mask, Bob Bolton, as we have said, dropped a little behind.

From his waist he uncoiled a small rope, and adjusted a noose in one end.

"Now, men, we separate here," warned Captain Mask.

Bob Bolton spurred his horse to the side of Scowler and cast his noose skillfully. The next instant the outlaw's horse stumbled and fell, casting his rider over his head.

In a twinkling Bob Bolton had taken his place beside Claire.

This was done while Captain Mask's head was turned, addressing to his men the last words of instruction, and though he heard the horse fall, he did not see the exchange.

There was no time to stop. He wheeled into the trail he was to follow, and his men disappeared down the other.

Claire knew that she had an enemy on one side and a friend on the other!

"Who was it that fell?" asked Captain Mask.

"Scowler," replied the sheriff, coolly.

"Then, who in the fiend's name are you?"

"Bob Bolton, at your service!"

And the next instant Captain Mask was knocked from his horse by the butt of a revolver.

"Oh, I am saved!" cried Claire, reining in her horse. "How can I thank you, sir?"

"By not going back there," said Alameda's sheriff, hastily seizing her bridle-rein, and preventing her from turning her horse.

"But they are friends. Let us rejoin them."

"They *may* be friends. Trust to me, and your safety will be certain."

Claire felt her heart sink with vague dread. Who was this man? Had she only exchanged captors?

She grasped the pistol he had given her, determined to use it against him, if need be.

"But they *are* friends," she repeated, in a tremulous voice. "My husband may be among the very men who have followed us."

"Mrs. Cheswick, trust me to do only what is for your greatest good."

"Mrs. Cheswick! You know me, then?"

"Yes."

"And who are you?"

"Bob Bolton, Sheriff of Alameda County."

"Of Alameda county! In California?"

"The same. And I have come all the way here to right your wrongs, and restore you to your home."

"Oh!" cried Claire, in great agitation.

"And does my husband know of your presence here?"

"No. But he shall know in due time. And now we have no more time to lose. I must secure this fellow—your worst enemy, Patent-leather Joe!"

"But why cannot we return to my husband?" asked Claire, shuddering, as Bob Bolton dismounted to bind the unconscious road-agent.

"Because, while this is the second of your chief enemies that I have captured, there is another in Hard Pan more to be dreaded than either of these, I reckon. I don't know jest why he joined 'em; but—My God!—here he comes! Drive ahead down the ravine. I will overtake you!"

In affright Claire saw a single horseman charging down upon them—a tall man in the habit of a monk, his features concealed by a mask. She saw Bob Bolton's pistol flash. The monk's horse gave a tremendous bound into the air, uttering a shrill death-cry; then fell crashing to the ground.

"Away! Away!" shouted Bolton, as other horsemen now loomed into view behind the one just unhorsed.

They might be creatures of Captain Mask under the leadership of the Masked Monk, or they might be the men of Hard Pan. Bob Bolton had little more faith in one than in the other. In this desperate game he preferred to play a lone hand.

Abandoning Patent-leather Joe, he bounded into the saddle. Then there was hard riding, the event of which proved that Captain Mask had picked his horses well.

After an hour of keenest anxiety to Claire, her guide drew up before the mouth of a cave.

"Are we to enter there?" she asked.

"Yes. It is a place of perfect security, until I can bring your husband to you, which I

promise to do. Meanwhile, I want you to guard your bitterest enemy."

"Whom?"

"Come and see."

They entered; and from a shake-down in one corner of the cave arose Lieutenant Mask.

"That *man*!" cried Claire in fear.

"That *woman*!" corrected Bob Bolton.

"Your cousin, Hortense Ashurst."

"You!—*you* here!" cried Claire, who, it will be borne in mind, knew nothing of her father's death, and until this moment supposed that her cousin was living in far-away California, as the wife of the old millionaire she had entrapped.

As for Hortense Ashurst, the disappointment of all her plots seemed at hand; she saw her hated and successful rival in Alf Cheswick's love come to triumph over her; and in a transport of insane fury, she leaped at her cousin's throat with a tigress-like bound, shrieking:

"Death! Death! DEATH!"

CHAPTER XIII.

WOMAN AGAINST WOMAN.

BUT Bob Bolton stood ready to check the assailant in mid career and hold her in his vise-like gripe.

"None o' that, my beauty!" he cried. "I'm sorry that you put me to the painful necessity of tying you up. But I don't want to find this little girl strung to ribbons when I git back; so, here goes."

And Hortense Ashurst's proud spirit chafed in actual bonds, while her rival looked coldly on.

"Waal, I'll be back as quick as I can," said Alameda's sheriff; "and I'll fetch one that you'll be glad to see, little woman; and it won't be *my* fault if I don't fetch one that you're not so sweet on!"

And with this parting pleasantry, the sheriff left these two women between whom existed so bitter an antagonism.

Now, there was one thing that Claire had not counted on—woman's curiosity. She expected to preserve a dignified silence, not triumphing over her enemy, nor noticing her in any way. But before long she began to wonder how Hortense came to be on the eastern slope of the Rocky Mountains, when she had left her, as she supposed, successful in her plot to marry an old millionaire in his dotage, and queen it over his palatial home, almost within sight of the rolling Pacific.

By way of opening a conversation, she asked: "Can I do anything for you, Mrs. Rensalier? You may be thirsty."

Hortense started at the name by which she was addressed, and gazed at Claire curiously.

"No, thanks," she said, slowly.

Then, after a moment's reflection, she in turn threw out a feeler:

"You seem to be laboring under a misapprehension. I am not Mrs. Rensalier."

Claire's eyes flashed with interest and exultation.

"Oh—so you were foiled in your very womanly ambition?" she sneered.

A terrible look of wickedness came into Hortense Ashurst's eyes.

"Is it possible that she does not know?" she reflected. "He has hidden the truth from her. How much, I wonder?"

Then she said:

"You may not have been informed that your father's death took place—"

"My father's death?" screamed Claire, leaping to her feet.

"Certainly," replied Hortense, coolly. "Of course you know that he has been dead and buried for months?"

"Dead—and buried—for months!" gasped Claire, stunned by the blow.

The malicious joy deepened in Hortense's eyes.

"Can your—"

But she choked, with a sudden paroxysm of jealous fury. She could not say "your husband" to her rival. She substituted:

"Can Mr. Cheswick have *concealed* the fact from you?"

The venomous sneer which she threw into the question brought a red spot into either of Claire's pallid cheeks.

"My husband conceals nothing from me," she said, with icy dignity. "If what you say is a fact, he was not aware of it."

"Was he not, indeed?" cried Hortense, flaming with well-simulated indignation. "No one knows better than he that Stephen Rensalier came to his death on his wedding morn, since on his soul rests that bloody horror!"

"What? *What?* What do you say?" cried Claire approaching her cousin, as if about to spring upon her.

"I say," cried Hortense, boldly, "that you were so lost to all womanhood—to all humanity—as to marry your father's murderer!"

At that poor Claire shrunk back, appalled.

"Liar! Liar!" she hissed, plucking at the neckerchief of her boy's disguise, as if it choked her.

"Liar, eh?" said Hortense. "Let us see. If not to hide his guilt, why has Alfred Cheswick concealed from you the fact of your father's death?—why is he an outcast fleeing through the wilderness?—why does he subject you to the privations and dangers of this wild life, instead of taking you to your father's luxurious home in California? Bah!—he dares not!"

That shot struck home. Poor Claire remembered Alf's agitation when she had proposed this very thing. She forgot the implication of his mysterious words, that he was the victim of another's wickedness.

Strange ringing sounds filled her ears; there was a smell of blood in her nostrils; the cave spun round; and with a cry of horror, she sunk lifeless!

"Ha! ha! my lady, this is a taste of revenge, at least," laughed Hortense.

And she gazed with gloating triumph at the limp, motionless form.

Suddenly a thought came to her.

"If she has a knife about her, with which I could cut my bonds!"

No sooner thought than acted upon.

With difficulty she began to roll across the floor of the cavern toward the unconscious Claire.

After much wriggling, she laid with her back to her cousin. Then began a search which involved endless contortions and straining, and drew many a groan of pain and rage from her.

But at last she found the knife.

Now to cut her bonds!

Lying on her side, she held the knife in both hands, and drew her feet up behind, until the blade was between them; then began to saw.

It seemed an endless task. Every muscle in her body was racked with pain. Again and again she was forced to stop and rest.

But at last the bonds yielded, and her feet were free!

Now to gain command of her hands, and her rival should change places with her!

She tried to hold the knife between her feet, transposing the operation which had freed her thus far; but after repeated trials, was forced to abandon that method as impracticable.

At last she heard Claire sigh, then move.

A terrible fear came over her. Why had she not availed herself of the partial freedom to get upon her feet and escape? Or she might stun her rival by a kick, and thus gain more time.

She rolled upon her face, and began to gather her knees under her.

Claire opened her eyes.

In an agony of fear and disappointment lest all her efforts should come to naught, Hortense gained her feet just as Claire rose to a sitting posture, brushing her hand before her eyes.

A cry of intense hatred escaped the lips of the former, as she dashed upon her rival.

That cry warned Claire. She turned, saw her danger, and partially avoided it. But both women rolled on the floor of the cavern.

Then began a struggle over which we hasten. Claire was victorious in the end. Hortense lay once more bound, and fairly foaming at the mouth.

But one idea now possessed Claire. She must see her husband. She must confront him.

Almost crazy with horror and despair, she rushed from the cave, not knowing whither she went, following now this trail, now that, now wholly at fault, wandering aimlessly in the vast wilderness of rocks.

Hours passed. Indeed it was nearly daylight when a hand fell upon her shoulder, and a cry of triumph greeted her ear.

She turned. Her captor was dressed in a monk's habit, and his face was covered with a black mask.

For a third time within twelve hours, the tortured girl sunk unconscious.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLOW HER HAND STRUCK.

CAPTAIN MASK had fallen just beside the trail, so that neither the Masked Monk nor the horsemen who came after him, who were a part of the force of citizens of Hard Pan, discovered him; and the horses passed without stepping upon him.

When he recovered consciousness, his first thought was to rejoin his band, which he did, after considerable hard toiling through the rocks.

"We shook the squad that followed us," reported Scowler. "There is no danger of their picking up our trail."

"But we've got the worst man on the Pacific Slope at our heels," said Captain Mask, with an oath. "It was he who penetrated right here, and carried off Lieutenant Mask from under our very noses. The same man got away with me again to-night, by throwing you and taking your place. In the darkness, I did not discover the exchange, until he knocked me on the head, and I made off with my captive."

"That fall nearly caved my head in, cap'n," said Scowler. "I was afraid to try to join you, and so came on and met the boys at the Crevasse."

"Well, we have no time to waste in regrets. We must cut this place. That devil will have all Hard Pan in on us before we get out. We may be forced to make our exit through the back door, as it is."

"We're devilish lucky to have a back door to fall back on!" was Scowler's comment.

Just as the dawn was breaking in the East, the road-agent band was formed in readiness to leave their retreat, before they were hemmed in by the enemy; but as they rode toward the exit, there came a pistol report from the spot where the Masked Monk had caught Pete Larabee enjoying a surreptitious smoke, while on guard duty. Then the ravine rung with a chorus of mad yells and the clatter of horses' hoofs.

"Men!" shouted Captain Mask, "remember that you are fighting with halters around your necks! Forward! Charge!"

"Hah! The Masked Monk! He has betrayed us! Grind him to powder!"

When the lights went out in the Go-as-you-please Saloon, Alf Cheswick caught the gleam of a knife, then staggered beneath the shock of a terrific blow on his left breast; and with Claire's shriek ringing in his ears he sunk unconscious. His last thought was that he had been stabbed to the heart.

It was not the fault of his assailant that this was not so. Captain Mask's tool had meant well enough; but while the blow was descending, some one ran against him. The knife glanced on Alf's ribs; and it was the heavy concussion of his fist just over the heart that had stunned his intended victim.

Save an ugly-looking cut, Alf had sustained no material injury; but when he recovered consciousness, Hard Pan was deserted, its citizens having followed Old Ramshackle Peg-leg in pursuit of the road-agents.

Alf was in despair, when he found that he had lain unconscious over two hours.

He could not remain inactive, while his wife was exposed to he knew not what danger; but what to do, whither to turn, he was at a loss to determine.

He was at his wits' end when a man rode hastily into the camp, and drew up before him.

The light from the Go-as-ye-please Saloon falling upon the horseman, disclosed Bob Bolton, Alameda's brag sheriff.

Alf recognized him at once. Then his long-

tried heart was filled with an agony of despair and frenzied rebellion.

"Hold!" he cried, drawing his revolver, and placing his back against the side of the shanty. "I swear that I'll never be taken alive! I've suffered enough, for a man who is innocent of all crime!"

"Who in thunder said he was goin' to take you?" demanded Bolton, leaping from his horse.

"But you are here. Of course you have come for me."

"Not much! Didn't I let you go when I had you dead to rights? Do you think you rubbed my nose in the road ag'in' my will?"

"You let me escape from the mob, for the honor of recapturing me and taking me before a regularly constituted tribunal of law, no doubt."

"Thar's whar you make a mistake, young fellah! I let you go, for good, because I'm the best friend you've got in this hyar great an' glorious country!" affirmed Bolton, heartily.

"Then why have you followed me?"

"I hain't."

"But you are here."

"After your worst enemy, my boy. An' I'm a-goin' to fetch him, too!"

"After my worst enemy?"

"Patent-leather Joe!"

"But why—"

"Thar's no time for chin-music now. What we want is men! Ah! hyar they come!"

"But empty handed! My wife! They have not recovered her!" groaned Alf, wringing his hands in despair.

They were the citizens of Hard Pan, returning baffled from their pursuit of the light-heeled road-agents.

Bob Bolton did not tell Alf that Claire was in his custody. Instead, he had an eye to his own chief mission, which was the capture of Patent-leather Joe; so he said:

"They must help us to bag this Captain Mask. You fire 'em up, and I'll lead the way."

"It was no go, boys," said one of the men, riding up. "They give us the slip, an' the devil himself couldn't pick up their trail in them rocks."

Then Alf Cheswick's great despair goaded him out of himself. Leaping upon a keg which stood on end, he addressed the rude crowd.

"Men of Hard Pan," he cried, "you see before you a boy in years, but a man in suffering. You see in me one who has suffered wrongs unutterable, and all from the hand of one man—this Captain Mask, *alias* Captain Arizona, *alias* Patent-leather Joe, whose real name is Andrew Ashurst. This series of wrongs antedates my very birth. Years and years ago he plotted against my father, who trusted him as his dearest friend. That ended in the murder of my father, and the life-long insanity of my mother, while I was cast among strangers, not knowing my own parents.

"Next he sought to force my sister into a hateful marriage with him. Baffled in this, he strove to rob me of the woman I loved, while his sister, who is in every way worthy of him, made me an outcast, branded with a crime of which I swear that I am as innocent as one of you.

"Since then, he has exhausted devilish in-

genuity and fiendish perseverance in his efforts to get my wife into his power. To-night he has succeeded!

"Now I ask you to unite with me and rid the earth of this fiend incarnate!"

This speech had been interrupted again and again by groans of disapprobation. At its conclusion the air resounded with savage yells. The men of Hard Pan were ready for the most desperate venture.

"We'll do the fightin'—who'll lead the way?" demanded a burly, red-shirted miner.

"I will!" replied Bob Bolton, stepping promptly forward.

The men of Hard Pan looked the stranger over. They read his resolute face, his steel-blue eye. Then one of their number shouted:

"He's got the sand, boys! Raise 'er!—raise 'er!"

And again the welkin rung with a wild cheer.

Bob Bolton hastily formed his men, his rapid, concise orders and directions showing them that he understood his business, and giving them renewed confidence in their leader.

Then they rode away into the night, toward the robbers' stronghold.

Alf rode in advance, beside Bob Bolton.

In the gray of the morning, a boyish figure sprang from among the crags confronting them.

"Great God! my wife!" cried Alf, leaping from his horse. "Oh, Claire! Oh, my darling!"

He would have clasped her in his arms; but she waved him off, her face ghastly with horror, her eyes ablaze with frenzied accusation.

"Hold! Don't dare to touch me!" she cried. "Where is my father?"

It had come!—the end of all things! This was the last blow! His bounding blood turned to ice. He stood before the wreck of his happiness in this world, if not in the next!

Alf Cheswick shrunk from his wife in horror. His face turned white, then gray, then livid. He began to gasp and tore at the throat of his shirt. His eyes never left hers.

"Murderer!" she cried.

Then he covered his eyes with his hand, as if confronted and overpowered by a denouncing angel, and fell backward to the ground.

CHAPTER XV.

THE MASKED MONK TO THE RESCUE.

WHEN Bob Bolton so boldly abducted Lieutenant Mask (whom we will henceforth call by her proper name of Hortense Ashurst) from the very midst of the road-agent band, the Masked Monk had continued his search for the trail, long after Captain Mask (Hortense's own brother) had abandoned it as hopeless.

Up to a certain point he traced it, beyond which no diligence could find the least clew.

From this point he made excursions in every direction, searching every foot of ground for the trace of a horse's shoe, and peering among the rocks for the mouth of some cave in which he believed that the bold abductor would secrete his prize.

When he got so far away that his search be-

came random, he would return and begin over again.

In this way he spent that day and the next.

Then he went to Hard Pan, to find Captain Mask perfecting his plot to secure Claire.

"I must frustrate this, at all hazards," he reflected.

But Bob Bolton got ahead of him, and, not knowing his double plot, but viewing him as an enemy to Claire, shot his horse from under him.

By the exercise of some skilled woodcraft, the Masked Monk escaped the men of Hard Pan who were following him, and made as directly as he could for the point where he had lost Bolton's trail, thinking that he might pass there to take Claire to the place where he had left Hortense, when he hoped to be able to follow him unobserved, and so rescue the woman for whose love he had woven his intricate and hazardous plot.

But being on foot, he was too late. He only had the chagrin of seeing Alameda's sheriff on his return alone from the cave.

But now, sure of his clew, he resolved to lie in wait. So he spent a night of feverish anxiety, to be rewarded just before dawn by coming upon Claire trying to make her way back to Hard Pan, to call her husband to account for the death of her father.

She saw him, recognized the man whom Bob Bolton had declared to be her most formidable enemy, and fainted away.

When he had revived her, he said:

"You need not fear me. I have no wish to harm you. But you must guide me at once to the place where Sheriff Bob Bolton has confined Lieutenant Mask, or Miss Ashurst, as she may be known to you."

He saw her hesitate, and the fear of being balked by her refusal to betray Bob Bolton's trust seemed to move him to a frenzy of passion.

His eyes glittered basilisk-like through the holes in his mask; he gripped her arm, and drawing his bowie knife and holding it to her breast, cried:

"Refuse to obey me and I will cleave your heart in twain! Come! come! woman, I give you your life and freedom unharmed for the knowledge of Miss Ashurst's whereabouts. Lead on! I command you!"

"I will obey you sir!—I will do the best I can!" gasped Claire, in terror. "But I may fail through ignorance. I was never here before."

"Look about you. Scrutinize every rock," said the Masked Monk, in a kind tone. "I am not your enemy. You have nothing to fear from me."

He knew that if he could compose her fear, she would do all the better.

Guided by his suggestions and her own recollections, Claire at last found the cave.

"You swear that she is in there?" he asked.

"Yes," answered Claire.

"I do not wish you to enter with me," he said. "Go; you are free; and I thank you for your assistance."

Then he added directions how to return to Hard Pan; and after Claire had started on her way, he turned to enter the cave.

At first he hesitated at the entrance, apparently overcome by a strong flood of emotions. In vain he struggled to master himself; and at last, yielding to his feelings, he rushed in almost frantically.

He found the woman of his love trussed like a felon; and over his soul swept a storm of indignation and wounded love.

"My God!—*you!*—bound like this!" he cried, his voice betraying his deep emotion.

And though she had not recognized it on that day when he had penetrated the robbers' retreat and made himself one of them on his own terms, now there seemed to be a familiar cadence in it.

Where had she heard it before? She could not tell. And yet it seemed to echo and re-echo through the chambers of her soul.

With swift slashes of his bowie, he severed her bonds, and lifted her tenderly to her feet.

"Thank God, I have found you, at last, even in so sad a plight!" he said, with deep earnestness.

"I thank you, sir," she replied. "But are you alone? Where are Capt. Mask and his men?" she asked, looking beyond him for others to follow. Then an infusion of bitterness crept into her tone, as she went on:—"What! was there not *one* to accompany you in your search for me? Was my rescue left entirely to a stranger?"

The Masked Monk tried to save her feelings, by dissembling the embarrassment which, however, her delicate ear did not fail to detect.

"I alone have found you," he said, earnestly. "I cannot express my gratification at being able to say so. But rest assured that others were equally faithful, though not so fortunate."

"I thank you," she replied. "You are very kind. But I cannot help thinking that one who should have abandoned all else and left no stone unturned until I was recovered, has been diverted to the prosecution of his own aims."

She hit the nail so fairly on the head, perhaps because she knew her brother well, that the Masked Monk, thrown off his guard, exclaimed:

"Has Bob Bolton told you—"

But there he stopped, seeing the change in her countenance.

"Ah! It was as I suspected," she said, almost fiercely. "No; Bob Bolton told me nothing. But now I depend upon your courtesy to tell me all that has happened since my abduction."

The Masked Monk was a man of the world. He knew that hesitancy on his part would only make matters worse, when the woman had insisted until she had drawn the whole truth from him; so he told her all, adding by way of explanation:

"If Captain Mask had secured his prisoner, he would then have been in position to negotiate an exchange with the Californian sheriff."

"Yes," said Hortense, with a slumberous fire in her eyes, "if, valuing his captive not higher than his sister, he had been disposed to make the exchange!"

"But, come!" she added, "let us leave this place. When Bob Bolton returns, which may be at any moment, he will not come alone. Delay may yet cost us our liberty."

"I have horses at a little distance," said the Masked Monk. "But—"

"You seem to have taken every precaution," she interrupted, looking at him keenly.

"Yes," he replied, simply; but there was that in the tone of his voice and in the direct look of his eyes through the holes of his mask, that stirred strange emotions in her breast.

"I have much to thank you for," she said. "My identity is revealed to you now, even if you did not know me before my mask was removed. May I not know my rescuer?"

As at this instant they emerged from the torch-light of the cave into the early morning light of nature, the face of the woman, pale from the anxieties through which she had passed, appealed strongly to her escort, as she raised her eyes in expectancy.

"You place me in a very painful dilemma," he faltered. "It costs me more than you may perhaps believe to deny you *anything*."

There was no mistaking the meaning of such words. Even a wicked woman may be very womanly in some things.

Hortense Ashurst felt her heart flutter as it had never fluttered before. Before her fancy rose the picture of that man who had ridden dauntlessly upon death, and then treated her with such noble magnanimity, such gentle courtesy. Was this he? She felt assured that it was. And now she was more anxious that, for the present, at least, he should retain his mask, than she had been, a moment before, that he should remove it.

Blushing to the temples she said:

"I retract my request, sir. I will wait your own time."

"It may be very soon, if—if—"

Then he stopped, as much embarrassed as she. She dared not ask him the condition, but walked on with her eyes on the ground.

"Here are our horses," he said. "You may hesitate over what I am about to propose; but I believe it for your greatest good. The country is thoroughly incensed against Captain Mask; and to-day, I believe, will witness the outburst. Sheriff Bob Bolton has sworn to capture the captain; and he will lead the miners. What I wish to request is, that you permit me to escort you away from here, to a place of safety. Will you trust me?"

"I must see my brother, first," she said.

He did not attempt to dissuade her, but assisted her into the saddle; and they rode rapidly toward the road-agents' stronghold.

Just as they turned into the mouth of the ravine, the Masked Monk exclaimed:

"Great Heaven! here are our enemies! We are entrapped!"

It was too late to turn back, so they dashed up the ravine.

Seeing a body of horsemen, the sentinel fired at those in advance. He did not wait to see the effect of his shot, and so risk capture; but scampered up the glen as fast as his legs could carry him. He had warned the band, and that was all that was necessary.

A moment later the Masked Monk was in danger from the enraged road-agents, who believed that he had betrayed them; but Hortense, who had replaced her mask, so that she

was easily recognizable as their abducted lieutenant, extended her arms, and leaning across his horse's withers, so as to cover his body with hers, shouted:

"Hold! He is my rescuer! He is one of us! Here are enemies in plenty!"

CHAPTER XVI.

LOVE CONQUERS HATE.

WE have seen how, having been released by the Masked Monk, Claire came upon her husband.

After her wild denunciation, she began to gasp and sob hysterically, and might have fallen, but that Bob Bolton leaped from his horse and caught her, crying:

"Hold on! For God's sake, what are you saying? Alf Cheswick is as innocent of your father's death as you are!"

"What? What?" cried Claire, with a ray of hope.

Then the recollection of Alf's agitation overpowered her again, and in despair she cried:

"No! no! He hid my father's death from me. Then his manner betrayed his guilt. He is a fugitive from justice. And I his wife—his wife! Oh, God!"

"Yes, you *are* his wife," said Bob Bolton, sternly. "And you ought to have more faith in a man who has never failed in his love for you."

"Yes, yes, my darling!" groaned Alf, who, though overpowered by misery, had not lost consciousness. "It was because I loved you so, and feared to lose you. It was my dread lest you should believe me guilty, like the rest, and shrink from me. And now it has come! Oh, God! But I swear to you—I swear to you, Claire, that I know no more of the crime than do you! That wicked woman accused me, to wreak vengeance on you and me for the disappointment of her vile plot. But, Claire, look at me! I am innocent—oh, I *am* innocent!"

He was crouching at her feet. His white face appealed to her.

She looked at him. The recollection of all the love he had lavished upon her rushed over her heart.

With a great cry she sunk into his embrace, winding her arms about his neck.

"I believe you! I believe you! Oh, I believe you!" she cried.

"Thank God! thank God!" he aspirated, as he gathered her close to his heart.

"Oh, Alf! can you ever forgive me?" she sighed. "I shall die of shame and sorrow!"

"No! no!" cried Alf. "You will live to love and happiness. You will double the blessedness of these few months, and extend it over all our lives!"

"And now let me speak," said Bob Bolton. "A perfect *alibi* has been established by Alf Cheswick's friends. At the time of the murder he could not possibly have been within twenty miles of the place. He stands as clear before the law as I do."

"Oh, Alf!" sighed Claire.

"But the real criminal shall not escape," said Bob Bolton. "I hope to have him in a hobble within the hour."

"He is—" began Alf.

"Patent-leather Joe?" cried Claire.

"Exactly—otherwise known as Captain Mask. Miss Ashurst owes the defeat of her little game to her brother, who did his level best, after killing the father, to marry the daughter and heiress."

Claire shuddered.

Alf drew her closer.

"But, come! We are losing time," cautioned Alameda's sheriff.

Then they all sprung into the saddle, and dashed forward.

At the mouth of the ravine leading to the road-agents' stronghold Bob Bolton espied the Masked Monk and Lieutenant Mask.

"There they go—a pair of them!" he shouted.

"Forward! *Charge!*"

"Claire, stay here—out of danger!" cried Alf; and not stopping to see whether she obeyed, so frenzied with eagerness was he to get at his foe, he spurred forward.

For once Claire did *not* obey her lord's command, but dashed after him with the rest.

Up the glen and into the valley of the robbers' retreat they swept, making the rocks resound with their yells.

The loyalty of the Masked Monk established, Captain Mask looked beyond him at the real foe.

"They are too many for us!" he shouted.

"Give them one volley, and then make for the other exit!"

"Ready! *Fire!*"

A line of flame and smoke hid the faces of the road-agents. A leaden hail swept through the ranks of the Vigilantes.

"About! Retreat!" thundered Captain Mask.

Then in a compact body they dashed toward the other end of the valley.

"Charge! Charge! Reverse your fire!" thundered Bob Bolton; and the gallant style in which Alameda's brag sheriff headed his men would have "done ole Californy proud" could she but have seen it!

The length of the valley swept the two bodies of horsemen, until the road-agents came to a narrow cleft in the rocky wall that bounded the further end. Just as they were about to enter, the narrow defile seemed crossed by a flash of lightning. Then a cloud of white smoke filled it from side to side. And the crags quivered with the lusty yells of the men of Golden Gulch, headed by Strapping Sam Silvernails!

"Surrounded!" cried Captain Mask. "Back! We may charge through the valley, but we can never carry that defile! About! *Charge! No quarter!*"

"No quarter!" responded the Vigilantes, catching up the cry.

In the midst of that mad slaughter, the Masked Monk seized Hortense Ashurst's hand, shouting:

"Keep close beside me! For God's sake, let us not get separated! We may never live to see another opportunity. I must tell you now. *I love you!*"

"Your face!—your face! Who are you?" cried the girl, wildly.

He lifted his mask.

She saw the white face, the blazing eyes of Colonel Despard Dangerfield—those eyes that now darted love and agony unspeakable, filling her soul with a mad tumult of ecstasy!

"I knew it!—I knew it!" she cried, in thrilling tones. "And I love you!"

Then she lifted her mask; and he saw on her face a look that no other man had ever called forth.

A cry of almost delirious joy rippled from his lips.

Then his horse crashed against hers; he flung his arm about her, pressing her to his breast so madly as almost to lift her out of the saddle; and their lips met!

So in the midst of carnage these two passionate natures exchanged their vows of love!

Then Colonel Dangerfield cried:

"Follow me! Now I can carry hell by storm to save you!"

Never was so mad a charge, so demon-like a yell of scathing fury. The Vigilantes—those who did not fall before the leaden hail from his flashing revolvers—fled from him in terror, as from a fiend incarnate.

But those who were not directly in his course, showered a withering rain upon him, and his horse was shot from under him.

With the agility of a circus-rider he leaped to the crupper of Hortense's horse, and so, covering her body with his own, spurred the frightened animal to madder exertions.

Thus he broke through the cordon of death, and sped away on the wings of the wind, his arms about the woman of his love, his lips to hers!

As for those he left behind, to borrow Old Ramshackle Peg-leg's expression:

"They was wiped out so clean that it didn't leave a grease-spot!"

Among the dead road-agents was found the body of the stage-driver, who had visited his chief just once too often for his health.

Strapping Sam Silvernails, who had placed implicit confidence in him, stood over the dead body and gazed at it long and earnestly. At last his feelings found characteristic expression:

"Wal, I sw'ar!"

Later he was heard to say:

"It's a dog-goned shame that he should git such a white send-off; but then, the cuss wa'n't worth the hemp to stretch his infernal neck!"

To this animosity of the proprietor of the City Hotel, Golden Gulch owes a strange monument.

It is a wooden cross standing at a fork of the road, where the stage-driver was buried, in imitation of the odium formerly imposed on suicides, bearing the following inscription:

RED
HEADED
RUBE
THE CHAMPION LIAR OF GOLDEN GULCH
TO
PLUTO
WITH
THE
BLASTED
SKUNK

But let us return to the final scene of that blotting out of Captain Mask's band of desperadoes.

Alf Cheswick—now in his fury the Flash Lightning of old—faced his mortal foe! Both were unhorsed, both bleeding from wounds already received, and so equal.

"Now death to you or me!" shouted Alf, and he sprung to confront the chief who had survived the last of his band, as if this were a fit culmination to that terrific fight.

But at that instant a shower of dirt was flung into his face by a horse drawn suddenly upon its haunches, and the revolver was snatched from his hand.

With a mocking laugh of triumph Patent-leather Joe leveled his pistol, to put the climax to his many wrongs by taking the life of the man he had injured beyond words.

But a pistol flashed, and the weapon was shot from his hand.

The next instant he was hurled to the ground and pinned there, with the foot of Bob Bolton, who had leaped from his horse, on his breast!

"Hold!" shouted the Solid Little Man. "The last road-agent has fallen. This is *my* prisoner!"

"But my mortal enemy!" shouted Alf Cheswick, drawing his knife and advancing menacingly. "Stand aside! His life is forfeit to *me*!"

"Hold on, Alf Cheswick!" replied Alameda's brag sheriff, while the surviving Vigilantes gathered round to see the end of this strange altercation. "I gave you your life when that mob had you dead to rights, and would have put you through, too, but for me. I let you *floor* me and *shake* me and make me *chaw dirt*! Why? Because I knew that you was an innocent man. But I swore then that I'd run Patent-leather Joe in, and nail the crime on him, and so show the boys that no yearling didn't mop the ground with *my* carcass, without my say-so! They thought I had got the grand bounce, for once, anyway. Now I'll show 'em that I was only *closin' their eyes*!"

"Alf, for *my* sake!" murmured a gentle voice, and soft, warm arms closed about his neck, and sweet lips pressed his.

Alf looked at her, and all the hate in his heart melted into love.

THE END.

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